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The political limits of the conscious MC brand: Ladi6, Urthboy and K'naan

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THE POLITICAL LIMITS OF THE CONSCIOUS MC BRAND: LADI6, URTHBOY
AND K'NAAN.

A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the award of the degree

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

from

UNIVERSITY OF WOLLONGONG

by

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Abstract

The contemporary hip hop MC faces a commercially powerful and globally established hip hop culture. To be successful in this field requires a distinctive brand, deployed across multiple media types. Within the hip hop culture there is a 'conscious', or socially engaged, style that emphasizes communal identities and is in tension with the imperative to develop self-branding in a neoliberal era. This thesis aims to show (a) how selected artists construct their own personal brands as 'conscious' performers, and asks (b) whether self-branding limits the political critique of the 'conscious' artists.

The thesis examines the self-branding activity of three politically engaged artists: Ladi6 (Aotearoa-New Zealand), Urthboy (Australia), and K'naan (Somalia-Canada). The process of self-branding includes management of online videos, websites, social media, live performance, cover art, costume, body movement, recorded hip hop tracks and merchandise. As I show these personal brands draw on national and gender roles such as the White Australian larrikin, the Pacific beauty, and the African poet.

The personal brands of these performers also make use of ideas that recur in hip hop: references to violence, displaying awareness of the socially disadvantaged, speaking out to assert pride and hope in one's community, and endorsing universality or 'oneness'. Public political critique by the selected 'conscious' artists includes their comments on the treatment of refugees, the objectification of female musicians, and the need for alternatives to poverty and war. However, the models of political work used—such as charity singles, being a 'respectable' role model, or allying with corporate brands to create the appearance of a global celebration—all deflect attention back to the MCs' brands, rather than to the causes they support. This limits the impact of their political messages.

Declaration

This work has not been submitted for a degree to any other university or institution.

Name ANNALISE FRIEND

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Chapter 1: Introduction

There is a habit in some academic writing about popular music to declare a deep love for the form that will be analysed. This is often located in the acknowledgements or else in the body of the text itself:

Like many of the academics and Black¹ popular critics writing about rap, I have a love for Hip-Hop culture and rap music. This love at one time stopped me from writing about rap, but now it prompts me to critique and explore rap in more meaningful ways (Pough 138).

This love makes sense; personal experience can be a thrilling motivation for academic research. Being thrown in the crowd of a hip hop show in Sydney, Australia, can start questions burrowing in the mind. Do they feel the beat like I do? Is it funny or fantastic that he is rapping with an Australian accent?

So far, so true for me. I am a performer and facilitator of body percussion, percussion, movement, and spoken word, which has taken me from corporate conferences to folk festivals, from youth centres to accessible arts programs. Through these experiences, and from talking to other artists, it became clear to me that developing a personal brand was an important part of being a performer. Whether a stilt-walker, drummer, burlesque performer, slam poet, MC, or dancer, the task to clearly communicate a catchy 'thing' to sell yourself was agreed upon.

Camping in a backyard while performing at a festival in the Australian 'hippie Mecca', Byron Bay, a female singer and MC told me that she was affronted at someone copying her hairstyle, which was her 'trademark'. Long before reality television 'stars' repeated the mantra that they are a 'business', I heard this sentiment within cultural contexts that also circulated ideas of being anti-capitalist and anti-conformist (Hearn

¹ This thesis capitalises Black, Indigenous, Pacific Islander and Maori for consistency, unless quoting someone who is using the lowercase.

“Reality Television” 69). Away from these environments, the notion of self-commodification also repeatedly emerged in debate over the political uses of hip hop in both scholarly and popular discourse. The debate in academic literature can be broadly summarised as endorsing or criticising qualities attributed to ‘conscious’ or ‘gangsta’ MCs; it is this binary that I hope to complicate in this thesis through the concept of self-branding. In my research I ask how they reconcile the kind of entrepreneurial work on the self that seems required to win an audience with the desire to be socially engaged. For me this is bound up with another tension—love and analysis.

Where does the love fit in, then? In fact, why *would* a love for hip hop stop a scholar from asking critical questions, or else help them to? Well, there is always the association of hip hop with ‘bitches and hos’:

You know Boo, it's been six years since I've been writing about hip hop on the womanist tip and I'm still getting asked the same questions. At work, the intelligentsia types want to know if, "Given the undeniably high content of sexism and misogyny in rap music, isn't a declared commitment to both, well, incongruous?" And my girls they just come right out, "You still wit that nigga?" [italics in original] (Morgan "Fly-Girls"151).

Indeed, my love for hip hop is also confronted by lyrics and gender roles that seem to denigrate women. The complicated relationship possible with music is made clear by Morgan's reflection and by my own experience. Like Morgan, my choice to still be “wit that nigga” and commit to analysing a form of music that seems “misogynist” points to the fact that hip hop has a straightforward appeal for me: a MC rhythmically speaks directly (and perhaps inventively) to you, backed by beats to make you move. Loving the feel of music and its mood-altering effect can receive a jolt when lyrics, images or footage connected to a song counter a listener's own political stance. This tension between love and analysis is connected to the way that, as seen in the literature review to follow, hip hop has been characterised a site of political critique (Alim “Street Conscious Copula Variation”; deGenova; Keyes *Rap Music*; Stapleton). So this is also something that I love, along with

the beats and rhyming flow. MCs in particular have been ascribed the roles of preacher, philosopher or poet (Baker, G.). Hip hop, some artists say, is a culture from the streets that cannot be crammed into academic boxes (Keyes *Rap Music* 5).

However, even this notion has an antagonistic *currency*. The contradictory allure of social critique and the machinations of capital are found in hip hop history itself (Cashmore *The Black Culture Industry* 165). This is where my love may be productive, if conflicted. I *loved* listening to MCs, and performing my own poetry, for those elusive moments that seemed like direct experiences of an individual's thoughts and emotions. Was this in conflict with the need to commodify a 'self'? How did this effect the political outspokenness of some MCs? My primary research question formed: to investigate whether the self-branding of conscious MCs impacts on their political critique.

Definitions

If I gave you the mic would you lend me your healing
 phat² beats now from New Zealand to Japan
 I like them beats to the point hip hoppers understand
 if you know what I mean then you know who I am (Sheelaroc)

As suggested by female Aotearoa-New Zealand group Sheelaroc's lyrics, hip hop artists sometimes suggest that fellow participants have an intuitive understanding of what hip hop means, and to whom it belongs (Support Australian Hip Hop). This idea of a shared experience and worldview among hip hop participants is a powerful part of an MC's rhetorical repertoire.

Scholars and practitioners define hip hop as containing four elements, although some include a fifth element of beat-boxing (Stavrias 45). The commonly accepted four

²*Phat*: a fat, funky, heavy beat.

elements are DJing, MCing, graffiti and breaking³ (Mitchell “Australian Hip-Hop as a Subculture” 41; Youmans 42). In addition, a range of cultural material is produced that is connected to hip hop, but lies outside these core elements.

For example, hip hop music can use live instrumentation (Jingle Punks), acapella ensemble singing (The Brown Jabberwocks), both live and pre-produced samples (LATTY), orchestral works (Berezinski) and string quartets (Vitamin String Quartet). Outside the dance element of breaking lies associated styles that can be found at events that are promoted as “hip hop”, such as popping, locking, krumping, bouncing, and shuffling⁴ (Carriageworks Arts Centre). Hip hop lyrics and typography are cheekily referenced in the design of letterpress calendars (Ask Alice). MCing has influenced and interacted with other forms of hip hop poetry, spoken word, slam, and performance poetry (Australian Poetry Slam). Hip hop is also used as a category of theatre productions (Morganics, Maya Jupiter, SistaNative, Wire MC and Nick Power).

The spaces where hip hop activities occur can be public and physical: at shows (Urthboy, Okenyo, and L-FRESH THE LION), in dance battles (Carriageworks Arts Centre), and festivals (Days Like This Festival). They also occur in the private sphere, such as when participants rehearse, record, mix, and master tracks at home. Participation in hip hop crosses into virtual realms, such as visiting and posting on websites and social networking profiles, interaction in online forums, and ordering, sharing and posting music, videos and art online. Increasingly, hip hop, like other entertainment ‘content’ is a part of “convergence ... [or] “the flow of content across multiple media platforms” (Jenkins 2). Not only this, but practices that are associated with the term hip hop are interstitial, that is, they cross and re-cross the public, private, and virtual spheres. An example of this is a playful

³ The terms “breaking” or “breakdancing” are “hotly debated” by participants (Henderson 197). In this thesis I use breaking.

⁴This is taking the broad view that includes movement styles performed to hip hop music and in dance battles, as witnessed at events billed as ‘hip hop’ (Carriageworks Arts Centre).

series on YouTube titled *RapperTag*, where Australian hip hop artists MC to camera and then ‘tag’ or call on the next artist to make a video at the end of the footage (3ree6ixty). Some of these videos were filmed in public, some within private houses, backyards or recording studios, and all were published on the online platform of YouTube and can be viewed on a personal device.

Hip hop is also associated with marginality and seen as a mechanism for social change (Iveson 41; Mitchell “Another Root” 88); and has been incorporated as an ostensibly helpful activity in some community and youth organisations (Desert Pea Media; The Next)⁵. For instance, I have co-facilitated rhythm workshops for boys in juvenile detention centres in Western Sydney, Australia, where making use of hip hop rhythms and referencing hip hop figures was emphasised and linked to self-growth or ambition for ‘a better life’ for the boys (Desert Pea Media; Hip Hop Duende; Indigenous Hip Hop Projects). However, such events aren’t necessarily linked to broader music industry machinations; instead the emphasis is often on how participation in hip hop can be an alternative to criminal activity.

The visual appeal of hip hop design has been used in commerce. For example, hip hop cover art has been the overriding influence in some shoe and clothing designs (Cey and Adler), and as entrepreneurs, hip hop figures such as Kanye West have designed their own clothing ranges (yeezysupply.com). Hip hop music videos may contain multiple product placements (Hunter 15). Commercial hip hop is a competitive, capitalist industry that has become increasingly centred on consumption (Hunter 16). Hip hop artists themselves may accumulate wealth as entrepreneurs. The top five wealthiest hip hop artists/entrepreneurs in 2015 were led by Diddy who has a stake in multiple companies

⁵In Australia, this includes youth centres funded by local government, independent community centres, schools and juvenile detention centres. Artists providing programs to these organisations are freelance, and the work may be either voluntary or paid. Artist organisations include Heaps Decent, Desert Pea Media, Indigenous Hip Hop Projects and Morganics.

and a net worth of USD \$735 million (Greenburg). After selling his Beats headphones to Apple, Dr. Dre came in second with a net worth of USD \$700 million (Greenburg). Third is Jay Z at USD \$550 million, who launched the streaming service Tidal; fourth is 50Cent at USD \$155 million with income from multiple products, including Vitamin Water; and fifth, at USD \$150 million, is Birdman, who owns a record company (Greenburg).

Some scholars make a distinction between conscious hip hop and gangsta⁶ rap (Stavrias 44). Genre distinctions are themselves contentious. Broadly, the category of conscious hip hop has been associated with the socially critical lyrics of its MCs (Stavrias 44). Gangsta has been associated with the tales and images of prostitution, drug-taking and dealing, gang violence and incarceration synonymous with ghetto living (Quinn), and criticised as being symptomatic of a “nihilism in Black America” (West). Others have stated that gangsta rap was “a creative form of African American cultural production and cultural politics” (deGenova 89). Although they may in fact cover similar themes to those found in gangsta modes, conscious artists purportedly aim instead for a message of “uplift”: “a movement directed at uplifting or bringing toward self-actualization an individual or group of individuals taken to be in need of such assistance” (Peoples 28).

This broad distinction between hip hop that critiques and rap that spectacularises social problems is something that has been complicated in other studies (Maher; Quinn). For example, it can be said that the emphasis on uplift in conscious hip hop elides social problems while gangsta’s provocative images and roles highlights them (Collins). This thesis continues to open up this apparent distinction by focusing on how the entrepreneurial dictates of self-branding impact on the ostensibly political critique of conscious MCs.

⁶ Sometimes written as ‘gangster’.

The term MC⁷ refers to Master of Ceremonies. Its simplest use in a hip hop context refers to someone talking on a microphone over the records of sound system DJs (Chang 67; Gilroy *The Black Atlantic* 103). The addition of the MC to the early block parties of DJ Kool Herc and others is given a foundational place in the hip hop narrative (Chang 67; Gilroy *The Black Atlantic* 103). In particular, MCs rapping about social problems on a microphone are a part of scholarly accounts that characterise early hip hop as a political cultural form; “[w]ith the space to say a lot, rappers became musical pundits commenting on their lives and their communities’ issues” (Youmans 43). These communities were not exclusively African-American, as “young Puerto Ricans from the South Bronx and El Barrio have been involved in breakdancing, graffiti writing, and rap music since the beginnings of hip hop back in the seventies” (Flores 85), such as the graffiti writer “JULIO 204” (Chang xvi); and Jamaican-American DJ Kool Herc’s place in early hip hop is central (Chang xx). Nevertheless, the idea that early hip hop contained “socio-political commentary” performed by African-American MCs, without including others, is emphasised in some accounts (Ross qtd Mitchell “Australian Hip Hop As a Subculture” 41).

Two ideas came to be associated with these early hip hop MCs. The first is that they somehow authentically represented the political expression of those who were present at the parties, that they were vocal actors responding to oppression, particularly racial oppression; “in the Bronx ... a combination of social vectors including poverty and racism organically spawned hip hop culture” (Stavrias 45). The second is that out-doing each other and becoming known as ‘the best’ was important, a competitive aspect decried by some, as hip hop “is not about me being better than you or you being better than me. It’s about you and me, connecting one to one” (DJ Kool Herc). The ways that the conflict between expressing political critique and achieving dominant visibility as an individual

⁷ Sometimes written as emcee.

have subsequently played out in hip hop and its reception are further explored in this thesis.

The subsequent presence of rap music in internationally distributed MTV videos through the 1990s was seen by Murray Forman in 2000 as

one of the main sources within popular culture of a sustained and in-depth examination and analysis of the spatial partitioning of race and the diverse experiences of being young and black in America ('Represent' 66).

Hip hop has continued to be seen as an arena where participants speak out on racial issues, while using the role of MC, which draws attention to the individual rapper. Indeed, the two features of early hip hop mentioned, of providing a political voice, but within a culture where individual visibility is important, are not necessarily in conflict, as seen in the interpretation of Cuban rappers who later built

diverse transnational rap networks [which] facilitate the efforts of Afro-Cuban youth to contest emerging racial hierarchies, frame their demands for social justice, and create alternative strategies for survival such as hustling and consumerism (Fernandes 576).

An individual developing strategies for financial survival, or promoting themselves as rappers in a consumer market, seems to be in conflict with a collective "demand for social justice"—yet they co-exist in these "transnational rap networks". Similarly, MCs such as Afro-Germans who rap of police violence towards Black people have been singled out as the individuals in hip hop who perform political critique with their amplified voices, while in Tanzania, "[r]ap has become a central means for youth to teach others about joblessness, corruption, class differences, AIDS, and other problems" (El-Tayeb 461, Perullo 77).

I write of MCing⁸ rather than rapping for consistency, and to follow from other scholars' terminology (Mitchell "Australian Hip-Hop as a Subculture" 40; Stavrias 45). MCing is defined as rhythmically speaking lyrics, or as "rhythmic, chanted poetry, often

⁸ Sometimes written as emceeing.

tuneful but not sung” (Maxwell 54). This is broadly true, but like any definition, variations occur. For example, some MCs, including those studied here, move in between “chanted lyrics” and singing in their tracks (K’naan “Strugglin’”; Solaa “Oneness”; Urthboy “Hell Song”). Similarly, a distinction made between MCing and performance poetry, “that [in hip hop] the lyrics are skilfully delivered not only with reference to a melody, but also creatively around the beat” also has exceptions, as an artist such as Ursula Rucker produces work that crosses this divide (Stavrias 45; Ursula Rucker).

The three artists studied here all MC and sing. Ladi6 sings the most and is known as a singer as well as an MC. Yet she is also studied here as an MC because of her membership in an early Aotearoa-New Zealand all-female crew of MCs, Sheelaroc.⁹ Both her feature tracks with Solaa and her solo albums include tracks that feature singing and rapping, and musical and visual elements of her style draw on a hip hop aesthetic. I include Ladi6 in this study because she is branded using hip hop genre resources; I seek to examine how she makes strategic use of a hip hop role. Her presence as a solo female artist in a male-dominated arena and her promotion as “conscious” make her apt to question the relationship between self-branding and political expression by ‘conscious’ artists (Winter Games NZ Trust 2015).

In performing and recording hip hop MCs use the distributed voice and the filmed, moving, and speaking body. Unless performing acapella in co-presence, the MCing voice is technologically mediated. An obvious example of this is the practice of autotuning, which corrects pitch but can also apply a computerised effect. Within hip hop this has been particularly associated with Black artist Kanye West and his 2008 album, *808s and Heartbreak* (Kanye West *808s and Heartbreak*).

⁹ I will use the term Aotearoa-New Zealand to include both the Māori and settler names for the country.

MCing draws attention to the act of speaking itself. This reflexivity is at the heart of competition over who can speak, and who speaks the best. This is sometimes overtly a competition of skill and wit (The Roots “Ain’t Saying Nothin’ New”) or of the display of heteronormative masculinity (K’naan “What’s Hardcore?”). This reflexivity about who is speaking also calls into question whether an MC is ‘really real’, or if they are just playing a role.

Role Playing and Realness

Although hip hop is sometimes seen as a quintessentially African-American form (Stapleton 220), hip hop participants, fans and artists are found from Rome to Melbourne and have diverse ethnic and socio-economic backgrounds¹⁰ (Mitchell *Global Noise*). Hip hop tracks present MCs rapping about being a poor White¹¹ South African (Die Antwoord), or a brash, sexually expressive Sri Lankan Londoner (M.I.A). In these instances, hip hop is strategically used to present an identity (Haupt; Creech).

Making use of personal resources such as life narrative and identity credentials as a hip hop participant (particularly an MC) undergoes a test of authenticity. It has been noted that, in fact, “[h]ip hop authenticity is a commercial value that grew in importance as the music gained a substantial market share of commercial radio” (Hess 297). This value—sometimes applied in a commercial context—points to the critical importance of hip hop’s “fanatically-held belief system based on authenticity, skills, and notions of value that distinguish “keeping it real” from what is considered “wack” (trite and inauthentic) (Mitchell

¹⁰For example, in Australian country town nightclubs, as in many places, Salt ‘n’ Pepa’s well-known track “Push It” has been on high rotation since 1988 and claimed as ‘our’ kitsch song to dance to by many White Australians.

¹¹ White is capitalized in this thesis in order to follow the convention in Whiteness studies, namely to counter the normalisation of White as a neutral or invisible ethnic category.

“Australian Hip Hop as a Subculture” 42). However, as marketing personnel have detailed about popular music artists in other genres,

[f]rom the perspective of marketing, a ‘creative artist’ is not expressing him or herself in some natural way, but is involved in a self-conscious and calculated activity (Negus *Producing Pop* 62).

An example of an artist embracing this perspective themselves is David Bowie, whose “message was that a pop star was not a passive commodity but an auteur, whose creative field was the marketplace itself” (Harron 208). Bruce Springsteen’s knowing promotion of himself an authentic working class man prompted the observation that, in fact, “the more he tries to detach his image from [the] sales process, the more artificial his image becomes” (Harron 213). This is a summary of the way that promoting an image of the individual musician through the mechanisms of the record and advertising industry can seem like a challenge to the idea that the musician is ‘authentic’. This challenge is endemic to promoting a self through mediated markets.

In hip hop specifically, another complication to the idea of authenticity, or ‘realness’, is that hip hop includes strategic role playing, seen in the creative use of the pimp, hustler, gangster, criminal, murderer, prophet, preacher, critic, and visionary figures (Baker; Collins; deGenova). A figure often associated with hip hop is the male gangsta rapper, even as this role is not only performed within the confines of the gangsta genre. This is borne out in Cashmore’s observation that “[g]angsta rap may not have had very auspicious beginnings, but it went on to assume virtual hegemony of the genre in the 1990s when the genre transferred itself to the mainstream” (*The Black Culture Industry* 165). Since then, the gangsta rapper role has been a popular feature of commercial hip hop. The thug role was taken from gangsta rap, used in commercial hip hop, and then spread to other cultural products that also received international distribution.

An example of the broader use of this ‘thug role’ is seen in Hollywood films made for children. These roles may in fact make use of hip hop dance styles that were not actually associated with gangsta rap. This is seen in the breaking, popping and locking chipmunks of the *Alvin and the Chipmunks* franchise (Figure 1).



FIGURE 1. ALVIN AND THE CHIPMUNKS PROMOTIONAL IMAGE (4BP).

Perhaps the most egregious example of how far this co-option of the MC role has come is seen in the 2011 Huggies nappies advertisement that aired in Australia. A dubbed, rapping toddler imitates MC Hammer’s “Hammer Time”, and gestures: “Stop! Potty Time” (Figure 2) (hoperator).



FIGURE 2. SCREENSHOT, HUGGIES ADVERTISEMENT (HOPERATOR).

Here any sense that MCing is an important form of giving voice to an oppressed people is negated by the fact that even a lip-syncing, squeaky clean toddler can play MC 'dress-ups'. The choice of MC Hammer for this commercial is a way of further distancing the role of the MC from the voice of an oppressed minority, since the "focus on performed authenticity [in hip hop] was complicated by the crossover of rap albums, such as MC Hammer's *Please Hammer Don't Hurt 'Em* (1990), to the *Billboard* pop charts" (Hess 297). Here the nature of the mediascape provides an extra challenge to a performer's authenticity, as MC Hammer's role-playing is itself imitated in the referential television advertisement, found on the interactive platform of YouTube. On YouTube the Huggies advertisement drew comments from people for whom cuteness is not an adorable imitation, but offensive, such as "I hate to see Hammer's song done this way" (hoperator). This is not the MC as a social commentator of hip hop's creation story, but a child whose voice is dubbed while imitating an artist who himself created problems for the criteria of authenticity and genre categorisation.

Other examples of co-option of the gangsta rapper include the prevalence of African American Vernacular English¹² (AAVE) increasingly found online and, for example, in the language of some Australian undergraduates (such as “What up bitches?”). Another example of imitations of hip hop include the phenomenon of non-Black people knowingly doing a ‘bad’ version of breaking or the ‘robot dance’, displaying that they do not have the ‘natural rhythm’ of Black dancers, but that they can make a joke of themselves. This joke is seen online in graph form, where it is directed towards White people (Figure 3):

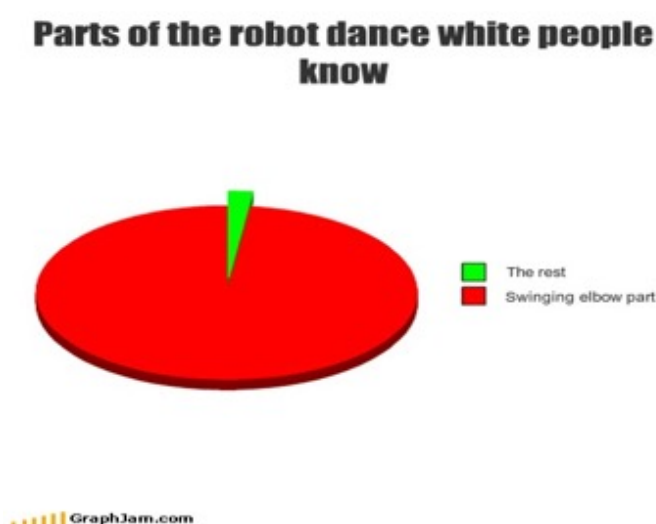


FIGURE 3: PARTS OF THE ROBOT DANCE WHITE PEOPLE KNOW (CHEEZBURGER).

These examples of flippancy, normalised use of AAVE and hip hop dance may include some ironic distance from the materials used. Such irony is tellingly absent in a 2011 promotional rap executed by White Australian media ‘personality’, Ita Buttrose. Used as a media stunt to promote her book on etiquette, it turns on the idea that a White, upper-middle class person ‘doing a rap’ is a well-worn joke (Figure 4) (Penguin Australia).

¹² Some scholars use the term “Black American Hip Hop Nation Language Varieties” to emphasise the “imagined community” of hip hop invoked in the use of this language (Alim “Translocal Style Communities” 116; B. Anderson). For simplicity, I use AAVE.



FIGURE 4: SCREENSHOT, "MANNERS RAP" (PENGUIN AUSTRALIA).

Here, the self-pronounced 'Ita from the block' signifies on Jennifer Lopez's alias 'Jenny from the Block', a chain of personae far from any claim to street authenticity. Here the joke—not a particularly effective one—of Buttrose performing a "manners rap", mixes so-called low and high cultural products and class participation. An Australian audience (particularly of a certain age and class) know that Ita is not 'from the block', and that, equally, hip hop is fair game, even for Buttrose.

A similar attitude of pointing to the laughability of hip hop is seen in the widely recognized gestures of imitating a gangsta rapper, such as mimicking a gang sign, crossing the arms, cocking the chin and assuming a tough-guy scowl. Yet, there already exists a parodist excess and exaggeration in the gangsta persona as performed by Black men themselves. For example, Majors and Bilson argue that that "being cool or adopting a cool pose ... is a strategy that many black males use in making sense of their everyday lives" (xi). Determining which uses of these poses are 'authentic' is far from simple, as authenticity is, ironically enough, a commodity within hip hop itself (Hess).

These examples show that the notion of authenticity is complex, particularly given hip hop's decades of international proliferation. This is not only the case with gangsta

rappers and their chain of imitators seen in commercial hip hop and other cultural products. Performers who use the role of conscious MC are also subject to scrutiny as to their authenticity (Stavrias 46). The tension around authenticity has also been previously observed in rock, which is a “mass-produced music that carries a critique of its own means of production; it is a mass-consumed music that constructs its own “authentic” audience” (Frith 11). Frith’s observation that an authentic audience is itself constructed through mediated markets also bears on hip hop, which includes conscious hip hop. Similarly, conscious hip hop’s audience’s expectations as to the authenticity of the performers is constituted through the process of consuming mediated music and the overarching personal brand of the musician.

The Conscious MC Brand

The base definition of self-branding for this thesis is “an outer-directed form of self-promotion singularly focused on attracting attention and acquiring cultural and monetary value”, or as phrased by Emily Marwick, “a series of marketing strategies applied to an individual” (Hearn “Radical Eclectic” 317; Marwick 164). Previously, self-branding has been referred to in marketing literature as 'personal branding', and sometimes investigated under the terms 'self promotion' or 'self marketing' (Chen 333). The landmark instance of the idea of personal branding occurred in 1997, when business people were advised that they needed to be the CEOs of “The Brand That is Called You” (Peters 83). Self-branding has since moved from being a tool for “celebrities and leaders in business, politics and entertainment industries” to now being conducted by consumers (Chen 334). Brands have been characterised as products, organisations, people, and symbols (Aaker). The idea

that a brand is like a person with a unique personality is now taken on by *people themselves* to market ‘the brand that is called me’. Now, self-branding

involves the self-conscious construction of a meta-narrative and meta-image of self through the use of cultural meanings and images drawn from the narrative and visual codes of the mainstream culture industries (Hearn “Radical Eclectic” 198).

Conscious hip hop is sometimes seen as outside these mainstream culture industries (Stavrias 46). However, the “self-conscious construction of a meta-narrative and meta-image of self” that constitutes the process of self-branding is undertaken by conscious MCs (Hearn “Radical Eclectic” 198). This self-conscious construction has been described as mimicking the process of corporate branding. This process, applied to individuals, has three stages: extract (your unique attributes), express (them as a personal brand statement), and exude (your statement through a branding strategy) (Arruda).

An example of an MC enacting self-branding, or exuding their personal brand statement (Arruda), is the Sudanese-Canadian, Emmanuel Jal. He uses the role of conscious MC to convey a life narrative (a personal brand statement or “meta-narrative”) of having been a child soldier (Hearn “Radical Eclectic” 198). He also uses this life narrative to make a political statement against war in the track “We Want Peace” (Emmanuel Jal Music “We Want Peace”). In the music video, he is joined by other Africans as well as the celebrities Peter Gabriel, George Clooney, Alicia Keys, and Richard Branson to call for an end to violence in Rwanda and Darfur (Emmanuel Jal Music “We Want Peace”). On one level, this is an instance of a performer using the role of conscious MC to express political critique, that is, his lyrics criticise existing social problems.

Yet, the message of pacifism following his childhood experience of war also forms a part of Jal’s greater self-branding; a part of his “meta-image” (Hearn “Radical Eclectic” 198). In a flyer for a charity that he founded, GUA Africa, his personal brand of being a

‘warchild’ is given primary importance, as is the narrative of individual triumph over hardship (Figure 5).



FIGURE 5. FLYER FOR GUA AFRICA, PICKED UP AT THE BASEMENT, SYDNEY, 2011.

Jal's childhood story was made into a feature-length documentary, *Warchild*, which screened at the Tribeca Film Festival in 2008. He has also produced an album and a co-written memoir of the same name (Emmanuel Jal; Jal and Davies). His individual life narrative of experiencing hardship, violence, trauma, and the displacement resulting from a refugee journey are found in his creative works, yet they all point to an overarching personal brand. It is important that a story such as Jal's is told, as the emotive power of an individual narrative may provide a way for audiences to connect with the 'issue' of child soldiers and refugee populations outside of political controversy (ABC News), news media

sensationalism (Daily Mail) and dry statistics of boat arrivals at the borders of Europe (BBC News). The existence of refugees worldwide has been described as one of the “most complex and dramatic phenomena of our global era” (Sobral 23). Yet, it is also important to attend to the ways that the productions such as Jal’s music, videos, documentary, memoir, and all of the accompanying promotional material and personal appearances produce a branded self that is more than its constituent creative works. I am interested in if the phenomenon of this overarching self-branding impacts on the political messages of conscious MCs. Specifically, I ask if the brand limits the politically critical message.

As outlined in the literature review to follow, the definition of a conscious MC is one that expresses political critique. Political critique is here defined as an MC being visibly ‘conscious’ or aware of political problems, as they also express this ‘consciousness’ in their raps, with the apparent aim of seeking to ignite the political ‘consciousness’ of their listeners. As further detailed in the next chapter, characterising MCs as politically critical or conscious is sometimes used by scholars to distinguish them from rappers described as either gangsta or commercial, and with cultural products that use elements of hip hop found elsewhere, such as the children’s films and advertisements just discussed.

Defining MCs as conscious and aware of political problems is not always an endorsement. For example, Tony Mitchell referred to the “dubious ‘pedagogical rap’ of socially-conscious US groups such as the Poor Righteous Teachers, X Clan and Boogie Down Productions [which] has been evident since the late 1980s” (“Australian Hip-Hop as a Subculture” 46). Defining conscious MCs against other kinds is seen in the statement that the Australian “‘self-proclaimed’ conscious hip hop scene” is distinct from the style of the touring commercial artist 50Cent (Stavrias 44).

Even as some scholars have suggested (without saying why) that the consciousness of an MC could be “dubious” (Mitchell) or “self-proclaimed” (Stavrias), a broad summary can be made of the qualities associated with these genres in academic literature (see Figure 10 in the literature review to follow). This summary is formed around notions of affiliation with gangsta rap or conscious hip hop and the corresponding use of the roles of being a thug or a preacher, a lady or a bitch, a self-promoting individual or a spokesperson for so-called community uplift. This dichotomy is challenged in this thesis as I show that it is a creative resource for the self-branding of MCs, as will be explored in, for example, Ladi6’s use of the ‘lady’ role.

These oppositions are described in the literature review to indicate the shape of much of the debate over, and within, hip hop as to its political and commercial uses, and preferences for a performer’s stylistic allegiance. As Tricia Rose has pithily summarised, in the American context,

[d]ebates about hip hop have become a means for defining poor, young Black people and thus interpreting the context and reasons for their clearly disadvantaged lives. This is what we talk about when we talk about hip hop” (*The Hip Hop Wars* 5).

When studying MCs outside the United States, the implications of these debates are brought to bear on different social contexts. In this sense this thesis takes “the state of the conversation on hip hop” that Rose has detailed and investigates the fit of its themes as evident in the self-branding of Ladi6, Urthboy and K’naan.

Research Questions

The primary research question of this study is: how does self-branding affect the political critique often attributed to conscious hip hop MCs? The secondary research questions are: how do individual MCs manipulate the genre resources of conscious hip

hop (such as lyrics, images, and costume) to assert a personal brand; and do common themes emerge from the self-branding of a White Australian man, a Samoan-New Zealander woman, and a Somali-Canadian man?

Significance

This study makes a critical contribution to the field of hip hop studies through an in-depth and comparative focus on three key artists who are outside the ‘hip hop centre’ of the United States of America. Many previous hip hop studies have focused on artists’ identities by making readings of lyrics, cover art, and performance (Armstead “Growing the Size”; Condry; Mitchell “Kia Kaha!”; Sobral). This thesis extends the scope of material studied to include artists’ self-branding across multiple platforms, including physical merchandise and online presence.

This thesis responds to the call to include intersectional studies of identity in hip hop, particularly of women (Hobson and Bartlow 16). A dynamic and developing field, intersectionality is a concept used by scholars, activists, and others to emphasise that gender, ethnicity and other aspects of identity co-exist (Sumi, Crenshaw and McCall 785-6). The term “was introduced in the late 1980s ... to focus attention on the vexed dynamics of difference and the solidarities of sameness in the context of antidiscrimination and social movement politics” (Sumi, Crenshaw and McCall 787). Considering “dynamics of difference and the solidarities of sameness” in the self-branding of conscious MCs highlights factors that impact on the public performance of political critique. This approach has significance to hip hop studies and the study of identity of public figures more broadly.

Studying Self-Branding

Self-branding is perceived as a symptom of the neoliberal era, as it is a result of extending market logic to every sphere of life—including the self. The practice of self-branding calls on the meta-narrative that developing a personal brand is an essential part of being a successful individual in the current mediascape. This meta-narrative has become popularised through the increased use of social media and the requirement to present a “coherent”, employable self across media platforms (Gershon 281-2). That is, self-branding is “primarily a series of marketing strategies applied to the individual...a way of thinking about the self as a saleable commodity” (Marwick 166). Thinking about the self in this way is seen in the field of popular music, a field that is itself powerfully influenced by the ideology and practices of advertising (Carah, Taylor 406-8).

As musicians work with corporate brands in commercial contexts, the idea that they themselves need to be branded circulates, as seen in the discussion of the need for Australian Idol contestants to focus on personal “brand development” through a season of the show (Fairchild). The presence of corporate brands is not limited to commercial or pop music, as demonstrated in Nick Carah’s reflections on Iggy Pop yelling on stage at Australia’s Big Day Out festival in 2006, “Money and TV destroyed this thing” (Carah 1). As Carah observed, “Iggy Pop & The Stooges are a building block in punk’s foundational myth ... [t]hese significant myths are mobilized in the commodification of popular music” (2). “Money and TV”, or the influence of corporate brands and the ideology of advertising, have certainly had an impact on the production of music (Taylor 405-6). A further dimension of influence is seen in the ubiquity of the idea that performers (and, perhaps, ‘everyone’) ‘needs’ to present a personal brand to be successful.

The idea that self-branding is currently a necessary and important social and career process, including for musicians, is invoked when studying the artefacts that comprise a personal brand. These artefacts are plural. That is, focusing on the self-branding of MCs, or their “outer-directed form of self-promotion singularly focused on attracting attention and acquiring cultural and monetary value”, actually involves studying *several* outer-directed forms that constitute the overarching personal brand (Hearn “Radical Eclectic” 317). The components of the brand—from merchandise such as a t-shirt or tea towel to costume choice and cover art—exist as a part of the pursuit of cultural or monetary value. These “outer-directed forms” of self-promotion include musical performance and recording, and photographs, videos, online profiles, and interviews which seem to have the ‘self’ of the artist as the originating point, but which may use the work of photographers, videographers, directors, and so on.

This means that there is an inherent difficulty in describing and analysing the personal brand of the MC in a written doctoral thesis. A personal brand is made up of, but is more than, these many digital and physical artefacts, as the brand is also gestured towards in the interpersonal and social experiences of music performance, recording, and consumption. As it is hard to capture all of this in a static thesis, I use a multi-faceted set of tools to give an indicative slice of the components of personal MC brands. It has been stated that “[t]he combination of an album's visual, musical, sonic, and textual elements in their entirety can constitute a relatively consistent narrative” (Sobral 24). The narrative formed by these elements is also, however, deployed through branding strategies and distributed widely to promote an artist, as observed by Nick Carah in the case of Australian rock-revival band, Wolfmother (64). For this reason, textual analysis of hip hop tracks, music videos, cover art and promotional images is undertaken, as well as discussion of merchandise and both my own and professional photographs and videos of live

performance. This means that not only is the “narrative” expressed by the artists considered, but also the media through which their personal branding strategies are deployed (Sobral 24).¹³ My analysis of examples of cover art works from the idea that they “give information about the genre of the music, the prominence (actual or desired) of the performer, and even the themes and moods of the album[s]” (Eckstein 97-99; Sobral 26).

The self-branding of MCs is found in highly interactive contexts and may constitute personal and shared experiences of diverting entertainment or devoted fandom. For this reason, images studied here include screenshots from online videos, websites, and the images available if searching online for an artist.

Physical objects are also discussed in this thesis. These objects have been included in this analysis because the personal brand of an MC, while connected to their individual body, voice, and creativity, is also something that travels far beyond their person. Branding may be crafted by artists and designers, but it may also be intercepted by fans and made use of in everyday contexts. For this reason, I include images of artist t-shirts, a stubbie holder, a baby ‘onesie’, a sticker, copies of compact disc cover booklets, and a tea-towel that I have purchased and used. My goal is to point to the way that these items may become worn, creased, or faded. These objects may be held in someone’s hands, fit around a bottle of beer, or clothe the body of a baby.

These branded objects are also distinct from sound recordings or information goods such as the artists’ online presence, as they possess the value of being for pragmatic use. In addition, the pragmatic value of these objects also mobilises particular identity positions, such as beer drinker, parent of baby, or person who does the dishes. In this way these objects colonise domestic space on behalf of the personal brands of MCs. In particular, the tea-towel, stubby holder, and baby onesie considered in this thesis are literally printed

¹³ Credits for images and photographs are listed in the Table of Figures. References for music videos are found in Online Sources and Videos at the end of the document.

with artist logos and images. They therefore materialise the brand of the artists, and the broader hip hop culture, within everyday life. These objects exhibit a kind of play with the commodity form for both the producer and the consumer.

Ladi6, Urthboy and K'naan's personal brands are also analysed in this study through the action of MCing itself. Their rapping voices are heard live as they move their bodies onstage. This MCing is also heard through personal headphones when listening to a streaming service, or joins with audience voices to become 'anthemic' in a performance venue. Therefore, my approach is not limited to analysing transcribed lyrics (although this forms a part). Instead, I consider lyrics as a part of a multimodal reading that can span multiple contexts. This "attention to multimodal practices" has been previously argued to be necessary to the study of popular music (Alim et al 9-10). This study does not aim to be a definitive reading of all of the work of these artists, or their respective 'scenes'. Instead, it provides a representation of the MCs' personal brands across the multiple platforms where they are found¹⁴.

To collect data on the way MCs perform their identities live, I attended hip hop events in Sydney, Wollongong, and Melbourne, Australia as a participant-observer. These events included live performances by Urthboy and The Herd (eight) and Ladi6 (two), and by other United States, Australian, Pacific Islander, refugee and Aotearoa-New Zealand hip hop artists¹⁵. In addition, observations from my own experience as a performer and facilitator in hip hop-related events from 2000 to 2011 are included. I write from a position of some experience with music and spoken word. This informs my reading of the genre features of the music, yet I specifically consider these sonic elements as they relate to MCs' personal brands. My experiential knowledge of hip hop in Australia and Aotearoa-

¹⁴ In fact, the technologies available for personal brand distribution have multiplied during the writing of this thesis, see *Challenges for the Hip Hop Theorist*.

¹⁵ See *Performances and Events in Works Cited* for details.

New Zealand, but primarily in Sydney, inevitably bears on my readings of Urthboy and Ladi6.

My disciplinary base is cultural studies and literary studies (genre/discourse analysis). I consider the language and other elements used by MCs insofar as it is a part of their self-branding. This study does not include research interviews with the artists, although it does make use of some information gleaned from brief personal communications. Analysing interview recordings can make for a valid and fruitful methodology. However, here I chose to work with the materials at hand that make up a self-brand, to analyse the identity positions that they mobilise. The materials studied are those that audiences already have access to (particularly audiences with access to media players and the internet). It is the self-branding intended for public consumption that is studied.

The Artists

The first artist considered (in Chapter 3), is Samoan Aotearoa-New Zealander, Ladi6 (Figure 6). She has industry connections to Australia and Europe. Her use of the lady role and her Samoan heritage make her good example of an MC whose personal brand aims to present her intersectional identity.



FIGURE 6. LADI6 PROMOTIONAL PICTURE (AWMUSIC).

Ladi6 was a member of Sheelaroc, an all-female hip hop outfit in Aotearoa-New Zealand. Their single “If I Gave You the Mic” was a hit in Aotearoa-New Zealand and, due to this, Ladi6 was nominated for Best Vocalist/MC at the 2003 bNet Music Awards in Aotearoa-New Zealand (ladi6.com). Sheelaroc performed in Aotearoa-New Zealand but disbanded before an album was completed. Ladi6 was also the front-woman of the subsequent hip hop-jazz band, Verse Two. She has provided guest and backing vocals and hip hop verses for many Aotearoa-New Zealand bands, both onstage and in recordings, for example for the reggae-based Fat Freddy’s Drop, jazz-funk-hip hop band Solaa, and for her fellow MC and cousin Scribe, who was a key figure in hip hop in Aotearoa-New Zealand. As a soloist she has performed in support slots for touring international artists, including European tours of the late Gil Scott Heron, and that of Erykah Badu, which are suggestive of her conscious hip hop credentials. Her husband, Parks, has many production credits on her recordings and is a part of her live performances. Her live band is now promoted as “Ladi, Parks, Julien Dyne, and Brandon Haru, the four musicians collectively known as Ladi6” (Ladi6 “The Alpha Sessions”). In a similar way to Urthboy, these collaborators have worked with each other in various groups, including Solaa. Ladi6 released her debut solo album, *Time is Not Much* in 2008, followed

by *The Liberation Of ...* in 2010, and *Automatic* in 2013, on the labels Question Music and Eskapaden Europe.

Ladi6 was chosen for this study as she is a female MC who has built a career in a male-dominated industry, and she hails from a location that is seen as marginal. As I will argue, Ladi6 exploits a narrative in which hip hop is framed as being a ‘natural’ activity for Polynesians, but she also uses elements from Pacific Islander and African American cultural traditions. This points to the way Ladi6 makes room for “transnational” identifications whilst holding onto her brand as a hip hop lady from the Pacific (Guilbault). Her use of the ‘lady’ role is particularly salient to my project of considering the gendered implications of ‘conscious’ genre resources. In the literature review I explore further the ways in which Ladi6’s brand must be considered against a context of “respectability politics” and the sexualisation of female hip hop artists (Higginbotham; Gill “The Sexualisation of Culture” 483).

The second MC studied (in Chapter 4) is Urthboy¹⁶. He was chosen due to his visibility as a conscious MC, and the fact that he is well placed to capitalise on the association of a stereotypical White masculinity within Australian hip hop. Discussion of his personal brand questions the interplay between gender and ethnic norms when claiming ownership of a genre, helping to open up the “state of the conversation” about hip hop in Australia. As a label manager, public figure and MC associated with conscious hip hop, he is suitable to further my investigation of the use of genre resources in personal brands.

Urthboy started to MC in Explanetary, a group of friends, acquaintances, and a “kid sister”. They released one EP, *In On the Deal*, in 2001. Other Explanetary members, Luke Dubs and Elgusto, went on to become the electronic duo Hermitude, whose

¹⁶ Tim Levinson.

performances include virtuoso keyboard, synthesisers, keytar and drum machines (Elefant Traks “Anniversary Party”). While he is marketed as a solo act (Figure 7), Urthboy’s collaborators, special guests, performance and production peers have drawn heavily from fellow label mates such as Elgusto from Hermitude, which contributes to the sense of the label being a ‘collective’ or a ‘family’, as explored in the Urthboy case study.



FIGURE 7: URTHBOY PROMOTIONAL IMAGE (ELEFANT TRAKS “URTHBOY”).

Urthboy’s first solo album, *Distant Sense of Random Menace*, was released in 2004. His second solo album, *The Signal*, was released in 2007, which increased both his sales and his visibility as a solo artist. With production by Count Bounce (of Melbourne hip hop act TZU) and Elgusto, *The Signal* was nominated for industry awards (two ARIA Awards nominations, a J Award, and a shortlisting in the Australian Music Prize) (Triple J “Triple J: The J Award - Urthboy”). The album was also licensed to Italian label Motivo Records and distributed overseas (Motivo Records). Further solo albums, *Spitshine*, *Smokeys Haunt*, *Live at City Recital Hall* and *The Past Beats Inside Me Like a Second Heartbeat*, were released in 2009, 2012, 2013, and 2016.

The performance contexts Urthboy is present in vary. In addition to sold out national tours for his solo act and The Herd, Urthboy has also performed as a poet/MC at events such as The Melbourne Writer’s Festival in 2009 (Melbourne Writer's Festival). He

has supported a range of artists associated with hip hop and spoken word. These include Michael Franti and Spearhead, the African-American hip hop pioneer Grandmaster Flash, British spoken word artist Saul Williams, popular Australian hip hop act The Hilltop Hoods, and the African-American hip hop and multi-genre outfit, The Roots (Motivo; The Roots).

As a soloist Urthboy has featured in Australian music events and compilations where he is the only hip hop artist, suggestive of the way he is seen as a representative of Australian hip hop. These include *Straight to You: A Triple J Tribute to Nick Cave*, which toured Australian capital cities, along with a compilation album and DVD being produced (Various). Similarly, he was the only hip hop artist in a charity event, compilation and documentary by the name of *The Key of Sea*, produced by The Human Rights Arts and Film Festival, where the artists were both established Australian acts and musicians of a refugee background (The Key of Sea). In 2013 he supported 'iconic' singer-songwriter Paul Kelly on an Australian tour, a novel combination of styles on a touring bill. This suggests that a hip hop artist is receiving recognition as an Australian musician and entertainer alongside established figures from other genres. Urthboy also MCs in the hip hop band, The Herd (Figure 8).



FIGURE 8. THE HERD PROMOTIONAL PICTURE (SMH).

The number of members of The Herd has fluctuated, but currently stands at nine. The Herd was formed to collaborate rather than submit individual tracks to a compilation, suggestive of the way they seem to be a collective (Elefant Traks “Elefant Traks”). An early hit, “Scallops” from their first album received high rotation on national youth radio station, Triple J, and is touted as an “Aussie backyard anthem” (Elefant Traks “Elefant Traks”).

The promotion of The Herd’s collectivity and their visibility as performers of politically critical tracks make them appropriate for this study. Such tracks include “0.77”, which concerns the Australian government and media’s depiction of asylum seekers, a cover version of “I Was Only Nineteen”, which honours the experience of Vietnam veterans, and “The King is Dead”, which was released when former Prime Minister John Howard lost power, and is said to have “celebrated political change” (Elefant Traks “Elefant Traks”). The Herd have produced five albums: *The Herd* in 2001, *An Elephant Never Forgets* in 2002, *The Sun Never Sets* in 2005, *Summerland* in 2008, and *Future Shade* in 2011.

As label manager of the independent, predominantly hip hop label Elefant Traks, Urthboy also works as a spokesperson for hip hop at industry forums and events designed to help emerging musicians. These include the *Song Summit* in 2010 (Song Summit). As such, his comments on various music industry issues are broadcast at these events (Urthboy *Urthboy Wins*).

The role of label manager sees Urthboy associated with ideas of creative collaboration and political and economic independence from conglomerate recording companies. The roles of solo MC, band member, and label manager intersect and all feed into his personal brand. In these ways Urthboy is an apt case study to investigate the presence of different kinds of political critique in MCs’ personal brands.

The third artist discussed (in Chapter 5) is K'naan (Keinaan Abdi Warsame), a Somali-Canadian who now resides in The United States. He was chosen for this thesis because of the complex mix of places, experiences, and people that he represents as a refugee artist who became recognised as a 'global' (i.e., outside the United States) MC. This status is largely due to K'naan's FIFA¹⁷ World Cup collaborations, and is the most prominent example of a conscious MC's performance from outside of the United States¹⁸ (Figure 9).



FIGURE 9. SCREENSHOT, "WAVIN' FLAG COCA COLA CELEBRATION MIX" (PEACE MAGAZINE).

K'naan released his debut album, *What Next?* On Cuffnone Music in Canada in 2000¹⁹. His next, *My Life is a Movie*, was produced by Track and Field and was self-released by K'naan in 2004. His first major label album was 2005's *The Dusty Foot Philosopher*, which was released by Sony BMG Music Canada. In 2007 *The Dusty Foot On the Road* was released by Wrasse Records. In 2008 *The Dusty Foot Philosopher* was

¹⁷Fédération Internationale de Football Association.

¹⁸Another contender is M.I.A, who performed at the 2009 Grammy Awards and had her music represented at the 2009 Academy Awards, being nominated for awards at both ceremonies (Creech 267), as well as performing at the widely broadcast 2012 Superbowl with Madonna and Nicky Minaj. However, K'naan's Coca-Cola and FIFA endorsed work involved touring 20 countries, and over a million people attended these events (Fast Company Staff). In total, 20 versions of "Wavin' Flag" are available, which charted in several countries, and as of 2010, these celebration mix videos had "garnered 80 million views" (Fast Company Staff). In addition, the song was played throughout the 2010 World Cup international broadcast as a Coca-Cola advertisement (Coca-Cola).

¹⁹ This album was recorded under the name 'Keinaan'.

re-released for the American market by A&M Octone, who also released *Troubadour* in 2009. In 2012, the EP *More Beautiful Than Silence* and the album *Country, God or the Girl* were both released by A&M Octone.

K'naan is apt for this study because he displays a life narrative of having fled from a violent home country to become a refugee in Canada. Through his performances, recordings, and branding, K'naan has claimed to represent refugees, people from his home country, the global poor and football fans from a range of countries competing in the World Cup. His use of 'critical gangsta' and 'troubadour' roles means that he is able to draw on gangsta and conscious genre resources, branding himself as a wordsmith, while also making a claim to the ultimate masculine 'hardness' of having escaped a war zone as a child. K'naan's use of his life narrative displays a strategic malleability. However, he is particularly subject to contradictory pressures of racial representation and the charge of having 'sold out' due to the high visibility of his life narrative. This makes him a good case to compare to the other artists, in order to investigate the different implications of using gender and ethnicity in their personal brands, at different levels of exposure.

Comparing a White Australian man, a Samoan Aotearoa-New Zealander woman, and a Somali-Canadian man in a genre that emphasises origins and authenticity highlights the different identity resources that are drawn on to build a personal brand in a crowded global field. Studying them comparatively also allows investigation of themes that are present in all of their personal brands. The four themes that emerge in the following analysis are gender, violence, consciousness and oneness.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

This thesis seeks to understand how conscious MCs engage in self-branding and how that might shape or interfere with their political critique. To do this I seek to bring two literatures together: critical marketing theories of self-branding and the literature on hip hop as a political vehicle. I examine ways in which hip hop, and especially conscious hip hop, has been thought of as offering a political critique of the racial, gender and sexual values that oppress minority cultures. Then the emergence of self-branding as a normative practice for workers in a wide range of industries under neoliberal capitalism is discussed, as I argue that it is the most appropriate theoretical frame to capture the commercial and creative dimensions of what an MC does to build reputation and engage with audiences.

Hip Hop as Political Critique

Imagine if there were no niggers, only master teachers (Erykah Badu “Master Teachers”).

A key way that hip hop has been imagined to be a vehicle for political critique is found in the literature that legitimates hip hop by seeing it as connected to earlier African cultural forms, that hip hop is a vehicle for connecting African Americans to their African roots. This suggests that African American hip hop participants somehow carry and revive cultural practices that they do not consciously know, and that hip hop marks both a generational inheritance of, and difference to, earlier African American and African cultural forms (Rose *Black Noise*; Toop).

Signifying and improvising are two activities that have been identified as essentially ‘Black’ within hip hop, suggesting that by performing them, a political statement about

reclaiming cultural roots is being made (Rose *Black Noise* 3). The first of these, signifying, has been viewed as integral to Black cultural and literary practice: “[to] name our (Black, literary) tradition is to rename each of its antecedents ... [t]o rename is to revise, and to revise is to Signify” (Gates Jr. xxiii). Signifying is seen as one of the links between hip hop and previous African American practices, and has been characterised by Louis Gates Jr. as “fundamental to Black artist forms, from painting and sculpture to music and language use” (xxiii).

Signifying in hip hop can be used to make a superior, cutting joke which insults a battle rapper or an imagined opponent, which has been seen by some scholars as proof of its connection to the African American street game of “the dozens” (Ramsey Jr. 165, Stapleton 220). In addition, signifying by DJs has been characterised as doing political work as it mixes other times audibly ‘into’ the present, thereby enabling connection with cultural roots:

Sampling, as employed by rap producers, is a musical time machine, a machine that keeps time for the body in motion and a machine that recalls other times, a technological process whereby old sounds and resonances can be embedded and recontextualized in the present (Rose *Black Noise* 105).

Improvisation in hip hop (heard when MCs ‘freestyle’) has also been linked proof of its cultural links to blues, jazz, soul and funk music (deGenova 123; Stapleton 220-1). The argument that the improvisation found in African American jazz is integral to Black cultural life has been repeated in mainstream media, films and advertising (Gates Jr. 168-9). African American cultural forms such as jazz have been characterised as “Black texts of being” (Gates Jr. xii). The phrase seems to indicate an attempt to elevate ‘everyday’ cultural activities to the status of a text that can be studied. That is, the ways of speaking, eating, playing and listening to music, dancing, working, and socialising constitute a common arena of identity play:

... very few Black people are not conscious, at some level, of peculiarly Black texts of being. These are our texts, to be delighted in, enjoyed, contemplated,

explicated, and willed through repetition to our daughters and to our sons (Gates Jr. xii)

Therefore, as hip hop has been likened to jazz through the common elements of signifying and improvising, hip hop is also suggested to be a Black text of being; a form in which Black people can be creative, 'be', and experience delight, while also expressing political sentiments.

For example, Black girls' street games such as double-dutch jump-rope have been credited with being a Black cultural resource for hip hop's rhythmic orality (Gaunt; Rose *Black Noise*; Ramsey Jr., Stapleton 220). Similarly, call and response (between an MC and their audience) and the repetition of looped drum breaks have been used to argue that hip hop's roots are in African American and African cultural forms; that hip hop is a contemporary incarnation of these traditions (Keyes "At the Crossroads"; Rose *Black Noise* 3). The repetitive nature of hip hop's looped drum breaks has been seen as producing a political meaning; as a way "to create continuity" within inner city environments that fragment the self (Walser 212). Other scholars have described the use of rhythmic "ruptures" in syncopated drum breaks as a way to "teach participants to find pleasure in and develop creative responses to social ruptures" (Rose "Soul Sonic Forces" 102). Rose's argument combines the idea that expression in hip hop responds to social problems with the notion that reconfiguring Black cultural traditions provides the means for participants to create their own meaning and pleasure, with this characterised as a political act in response to "social ruptures" ("Soul Sonic Forces" 102).

Connecting hip hop to an overtly political form of art is seen when the Black poet Gil Scott Heron is hailed as the "godfather of rap", with his piece "The Revolution Will Not Be Televised" being used as the key example (Moody "Gil Scott Heron"). Similarly, an academic study of hip hop has been dedicated "[t]o the Last Poets, who got there first" (Potter), and elsewhere the writings of Last Poets member Umar Bin Hussan have been

placed alongside academic responses to hip hop, suggesting that his poetry, hip hop, and the academic analysis are in dialogue, and that they all have political importance (Bin Hussan).

Other critics have pointed out that connecting hip hop to other African American and African cultural forms omits contributions from other people, such as the work of early Jamaican DJs and Latino breakers and the use of samples of 'White' music, such as that of Australian rock band AC/DC (Flores; Kelley; Nilan and Feixa). This view emphasises the "hybrid, creole" cultural origins of hip hop (Gilroy "After The Love" 73). For other scholars, the increasing popularity of hip hop with White fans, or "wiggers" was intriguing (Hess 308), or else "more complex and multicultural" than just White imitation of a Black genre (Walser 210). These scholarly arguments create a more complex picture than hip hop only being the latest incarnation of a Black cultural essence.

The idea of an essential Blackness found in hip hop has been challenged directly. For example, it has been argued that "an unbroken continuum that stretches back from rap music through soul, gospel and negro spirituals to the African-derived slave traditions" is a "myth" (Cashmore *The Black Culture Industry* 2), and that culture, following Edward Said, is a matter of "appropriations, common experiences, and interdependencies of all kinds among different cultures" (Said 3). The accounts of hip hop that sought to historicise it in a cultural continuum have been classed by Paul Gilroy as part of a search for an evasive "Africentric essence" undertaken by a "black writing elite" seeking to characterise a "black artistic and political sensibility" (Gilroy *The Black Atlantic* 33-4). Cashmore and Gilroy's perspectives suggest that placing hip hop in a cultural continuum can be made complex.

One way that a distinction between other Black cultural forms and hip hop has been made is in the notion of a hip hop generation;

“[h]ip-hop is the voice of this generation. Even if you didn’t grow up in the Bronx in the ’70s, hip-hop is there for you. It has become a powerful force. Hip-hop binds all of these people, all of these nationalities, all over the world together” (DJ Kool Herc 12).

The idea of a hip hop generation implies those who grew up with, and identified with, hip hop (which can actually cross generations: hip hop is now approaching its fourth decade), yet it also suggests that being a member of this generation may provide you with a “voice” to express political critique. The label of a hip hop generation has been used by both cultural scholars and Black feminists to demarcate those who experienced the socioeconomic conditions that have been implicitly and explicitly connected to the idea that hip hop is a vehicle for political critique (Chang; Radford-Hill; Springer). This account sees hip hop as distinct to other Black cultural forms, includes other cultural contributions, and does not need to relegate the idea of having a political goal only to a “Black writing elite” (Gilroy *The Black Atlantic* 33-4).

Other critics have pointed out that, regardless of whether hip hop is essentially Black or not, it might not be a helpful political vehicle for African Americans anyway. For example, the production of hip hop music, video and film has been described as a “black culture industry” by Ellis Cashmore, working from the notion of a “culture industry” by Theodor Adorno (Adorno; Cashmore *The Black Culture Industry*). Cashmore states that this Black culture industry has been “manufactured by elites to serve their own interests, often commercially as well as politically motivated ones” (3):

Aspects of the black experience can be integrated into the mainstream and, with the advent of the mass media, consumed without even going near black people. Hit a remote control button and summon the sounds and images of the ghetto. This is culture as the antidote to racism, a way of removing the complexities of history and society from the mind by introducing a painless cure: legitimize black culture, its literature, its religions, its athleticism and, perhaps above all, its music (3).

Elsewhere, the success of Black musicians and sportspeople has been criticised as performing a “compensatory function” to the longstanding denial of access to other cultural forms for Black people, such as literacy (Gilroy *The Black Atlantic* 85).

Yet, there is an implied class distinction from scholars and public figures who champion social and economic progression for African Americans as lying first and foremost in the growth of an educated, literate Black middle class, versus those who instead valorise hip hop as making visible the unfortunate truth of contemporary African American ghetto life. As literature developed, debates around the political efficacy of hip hop focused on qualities attributed to conscious and gangsta artists.

Confronting Consciousness

In some academic writing the political impact of hip hop is valorised: “[o]ne of the greatest contributions of hip hop artists to the political landscape is one of protest” (Stapleton 221). Elsewhere, “nihilism” is found in gangsta rap and its influence on commercial hip hop, which is symptomatic of Black America’s greater nihilism and is an urgent political problem to be addressed (West). Such declarations reveal scholars’ assumptions about the political import of hip hop practices, and more specifically, the ‘correct’ way to be politically active. By endorsing or condemning the lyrics, roles, and images in hip hop productions, some scholars endow the genre categories of conscious or gangsta with a form of political action that they either support or criticise.

A definition of conscious hip hop explored here is that it presents political critique in its lyrics, images, and cultural practices. This political critique is characterised in some scholarly accounts as communicating knowledge of structural forces that bear on individuals, speaking on behalf of marginalised groups, and suggesting an attitude with

which to overcome inequalities (Stavrias, Youmans). Conscious hip hop not only implies that its practitioners are conscious of social problems and address them; it also implies that they seek to 'raise the consciousness' of their audience, and so inspire political change.

The action of consciousness-raising is described in the previously mentioned definition of "uplift": "a movement directed at uplifting or bringing toward self-actualization an individual or group of individuals taken to be in need of such assistance" (Peoples 28). The idea of "self-actualisation" being a part of group "uplift" shows a tension between the idea that hip hop can be a political tool for Black people detailed in the beginning of this chapter, and the individualistic emphasis of reaching self-awareness. There are also some assumptions in this definition of uplift. The more "self-actualised" persons are the MCs, who need to target some less self-actualised persons (their audience) and improve their lot by enacting "uplift". This implies that MCs applauded as conscious have superior knowledge to their potential audience, and that their action of "uplift" will help their audience reach their own self-actualisation. However, audience members who may be helped might not agree that they are in need of such assistance, or even ask for it. The uplift has a one-way "direction" from the MC to the audience. It does not, for example "direct" a message towards people in power and help *them* surrender their privilege. This definition of "uplift" is not the only possible kind of political action, even if it is sometimes implicitly valorised as the correct one.

The East Coast of the United States, specifically the East Bronx, is hailed as the home of socially conscious hip hop (Haupt "Black Masculinity" 395). Examples of academic endorsements of hip hop's politics or consciousness have used the phenomenon of early practitioners in New York forming neighbourhood crews, developing their own fashions and breaking on the streets (Fernando; Rose *Black Noise* 34; Stapleton

219). This has been seen as a preferable type of social action to forming gangs and being violent, and the early development of rapping by hip hop MCs has been endorsed; “[r]ap captured the predominant frustrations of individuals often derided as violent gang members or insidious drug abusers and evolved intrinsically as protest music for the post civil-rights era” (Youmans 43). This quote from Youmans suggests that gangs are not a political protest in response to structural conditions in the way that the evolution of a protest music is. This misses the fact that social organising in the context of de-industrialisation and ghettoization is political, whether enacted in a gang, a block party, or a breaking crew (Rose *Black Noise* 21). Placing a protest music in a “post-civil rights” era is not, apparently, a happy time for it to exist, as hip hop “was a cheap form of entertainment well suited to the times. The heady days of civil rights had come to an end” (Cashmore *The Black Culture Industry* 155).

The idea that hip hop evolved as a protest music (and broader culture) in response to structural conditions—whether this era is suggested to be “cheap” and no longer “heady”, or not—is repeated when some early MCs are attributed the quality of being conscious. This characterisation is found in the statement that hip hop is a “confrontational” type of “protest music”, a phrase of Mark Mattern’s and used by Katina R. Stapleton (Stapleton 221). Mattern pointed out that protest music had often been defined as one “in which musicians decry the injustices and oppression endured by certain individuals and groups and extol the virtues of favoured alternatives” (33). Mattern characterised this type of protest music as confrontational, and that, like other forms of confrontational political action, this music can be viewed as centred on “resistance, opposition, and struggle” (33).

This definition of confrontational protest music was applied by Stapleton to hip hop. Like other marginalised groups who lack representation in public debate, (Rose *Black*

Noise 100), hip hop artists have been said to have strategically used “hidden transcripts”, or messages that criticise dominant social groups, within the form of a confrontational protest music and its culture (Stapleton 221). Identifying hip hop as a protest music suggests it is a new generational version of the protest music of the civil rights era, such as “Say It Loud, I’m Black and I’m Proud” by James Brown and “Respect” by Aretha Franklin (Stapleton 222). This places hip hop as the inheritor of previous forms of Black music that spoke of the reality of suffering and used the theme of hope for deliverance, such as negro spirituals, the blues, folk songs, and jazz (Stapleton 220).

The importance of hope as an aspect of ‘conscious’ hip hop has been found in studies of MCs from outside the USA. For example, Indigenous Australian MC Wire and Greek-Indigenous female MC, Little G, together with White hip hop MC, Morganics, are deemed to be politically conscious artists because they champion hope as a response to social problems:

The hope Morganics expresses is not an abstract hope but an embodied hope, embodied in the hip hop culture he lives. The music, rhymes and dances produced by Little G, by MC Wire, by Morganics and by the youth in the workshops, as well as many other ‘conscious’ hip hoppers throughout Australia, are the vehicles of this hope (Stavrias 52).

These artists articulate their own templates for being a conscious artist outside the United States. Similarly, Japanese conscious (*konshasu*) hip hop artists have been characterised as forming their own cultural “linkages and aesthetics”, so that they cannot be said to be simply “Japanifying” American hip hop, or being subject to “Americanisation” (Condry 10–11). In France, Beur conscious hip hop artists, like their US counterparts, tackled “racism and oppression”, but also defined themselves against the “entrenched French republican politics that uphold assimilation as non-negotiable” (Orlando 402).

Some scholars have found a philosophical and poetic depth in the work of artists seen as conscious. For example, Alim reveals his own ‘love’ for artists in a list of “shout-

outs”, where he thanks them for their “in-depth metalinguistic insights” as “bad-ass, street conscious linguists and street poets” (*Roc the Mic Right* 14). Artists hailed in this example include Afrika Bambaataa, Kuruft, Beanie Sigel, Freeway, Ghostface, Raekwon and the American Cream Team, Mos Def, Ras Kass, Chuck D, Zion I, Eve, Juvenile, Big Daddy Kane, Common, Saafir, Lil Kim, LL Cool J, Bahamadia, Boots, DJ Hi Tek, the Delinquents, Guru, San Quinn, Jubwa, Brother Brian Rikuda and Sonia Sanchez (*Alim Roc the Mic Right* 14). A similar testament to certain ‘conscious’ Australian MCs’ wisdom is provided by Stavrias;

[r]ap is wisdom as embodiment; by verbalising, the emcee is making experience into knowledge, where through performance this personal wisdom is celebrated through its enactment” (51).

This wisdom tends to run on expected lines, that is, being aware of one’s oppression and speaking out against it (often to a like-minded audience). In this way the consciousness of an MC can be self-fulfilling.

Some studies of hip hop artists outside the USA have emphasised the ways that they represent other people through their performances and recordings (Armstead “Las Krudas”, “Growing the Size”; Martinez; Mitchell *Introduction*; Spady, Alim, and Meghelli). ‘Representing’ is a hip hop term which describes an individual standing for, and being proud of, their origins, which can be their neighbourhood, borough, ethnic group, gender, or country. Artists selected for studies of global hip hop rap about ‘their people’ and places, providing material for scholars to reflect back the idea that by performing such ‘representing’, a political statement is being made that draws attention to the problems of marginalised people. For example, MC Narcy, of Euphrates, an Iraqi-Canadian crew, is quoted by Will Youmans, “[f]rom Slavery, to Ghettos to Colonization to Emancipation. Hip-Hop is a blueprint to create a voice and be HEARD! Word Hip-Hop is my tool to build my home that I lost somewhere in the process of immigration and displacement” (43). Here

developing a political identity and finding vocal expression in hip hop is akin to being at “home”.

Variations on the category of conscious can be found, such as Black Conscious (BC), street conscious, and nation conscious. Artists listed as Black Conscious include Public Enemy, Afrika Bambaataa, and KRS-One, who have been likened in their philosophical influence on South African hip hop artists to Malcolm X, with all of these figures providing an awareness of racial politics in the formation of identity (Haupt “Black Thing” 176). This emphasises that the performance of an awareness of racial politics is included when categorising artists as conscious.

Artists described as street conscious include Chuck D and Flavour Flav of Public Enemy, Big Daddy Kane, and Daddy O of Stetasonic (Eure and Spady). MCs such as Guru²⁰ have specifically been analysed as conscious by displaying their connection to “the streets” ... which are seen not only as a physical space, but also as a cultural space that represents the values, morals, aesthetics, and codes of conduct that govern life in urban America” through their rapped lyrics (Alim “Street-Conscious Copula Variation” 288). Street conscious²¹ MCs are described as speaking for disenfranchised Black people, or specifically addressing an “African American Street Culture”, of whom they are members (Alim “Street-Conscious Copula Variation” 299). Marley Marl emphasised that being active in hip hop means staying true to his “people” (meaning the people of his youth), and also addressing those younger than him, “because they are the future” (Spady, Lee, and Alim 27).

The importance of membership to a group, or ‘my people’, is elsewhere described as being synonymous with being ‘underground’ and opposed to ‘commercial’ or ‘mainstream’ (Keyes *Rap Music* 120). This suggests that staying street conscious equates

²⁰ From Gangstarr.

²¹ Sometimes written as street-conscious.

to remaining in certain performance and recording contexts, and not taking up commercial opportunities that are deemed ‘mainstream’, such as stadium tours or having top-selling singles. Elsewhere, in Alim’s terms, even if an artist *is* commercially successful with “White suburban fans”, if they have a “street-conscious identity”, then their lyrics are primarily directed at fellow members of an African American street culture (“Street-Conscious Copula Variation” 299).

Similarly, Keyes quotes a rapper; “rap is from the streets. If you don’t know what’s going on out there, you can’t do rap” (Fee qtd Keyes *Rap Music* 5). However, the rapper continues, “[y]ou can live in Beverly Hills, but your heart has to be in the streets” (Keyes *Rap Music* 5). Having your heart—or your solidarity and political identification—in the streets, even if you become upwardly mobile (and live in Beverly Hills) is here equated with consciousness. This connection to the streets, that is, the people who will consume music and attend performances, is more cynically detailed in a form of “street marketing” that record companies in the 1990s undertook by having a “street team” at venues to gather information or “street intelligence” and “create buzz” for hip hop acts through talking to people and posting stickers and flyers (Negus *Music Genres* 98–101).

Situating hip hop elements on the street is also deemed to be “[f]undamental to the proper interpretation of rap” (Keyes *Rap Music* 5). Suggesting that there is a “proper” way for scholars and others to interpret hip hop is dubious, particularly as it seems to be starting with the acceptance that when artists say they address the street, that they do, and accepting without question the idea that MCs *are* conscious of others’ lived problems and speak for them in a public form. At least, a proper method of interpretation for some scholars implicitly seems to be directly and respectfully considering such claims by artists (Alim *Roc the Mic Right* 23). James G. Spady’s work in viewing, and therefore valorising, hip hop “as a rich site for intellectual inquiry on historical, literary, philosophical, and

linguistic grounds” has itself been hailed as an important shift for the academy to make, “while [he] also acknowledge[ed] it as an incredibly funky, forceful, and contentious cultural movement” (Meghelli 97). It is possible to acknowledge this, however, while shifting emphasis to consider the ways that a performance of street consciousness, for example, is deployed in a personal brand, which may impact any political critique that is expressed.

Final variations on conscious hip hop used by some scholars are the terms “nation rap” or “nation conscious rap” (Decker; Eure and Spady; Keyes *Rap Music*). Much like “street-conscious”, these terms make a distinction between those who are of the nation, and those who are not. This also fits with the notion of “protest music”, where resistance to dominant social systems is key, as are clear distinctions between those being subjugated and those perpetrating the injustice (Stapleton 221).

The Black nationalism of the 1960s Black Arts Movement has been seen as a precursor to nation rap (Stapleton 224). Just as the Black Arts and Black Power movements influenced each other and reinforced the idea that a Black nation was a source of political strength, hip hop artists such as Public Enemy have been characterised as Black nationalists by their lyrics and interview quotes (Stapleton 224). The Fugees are also categorised as Black nationalists, although they are said to be addressing a worldwide Afrocentric nation (Stapleton 224).

A related term, ‘hip hop nation’ loses some of the specificity of the Black nation, but also suggests that identifying with a group of people, in this case those who also love hip hop, may be the source of a political movement. The idea of a hip hop nation can be traced to Afrika Bambaataa’s Zulu Nation, which he named and formed in the Bronx River district in 1973 (Keyes *Rap Music* 157). Bambaataa created this ‘nation’ as a vehicle for young people to participate in creative activities, as an alternative to participating in violence and gang formation (Keyes *Rap Music* 157). Now the re-named Universal Zulu

Nation has chapters in many countries, showing the flexibility of the notion of a metaphorical nation; an idea that in fact has global resonance. Regardless of ethnic identity, membership is open to anyone who “performs any of its artistic forms” (defined as the four elements of hip hop), which is again seen as implicitly politically preferable to other types of behaviour (Keyes *Rap Music* 157). Alim invokes this imagined community of “artists and adherents who espouse street performance aesthetics” when he “shouts out”: “[o]ne love to the Global Hip Hop Nation for representin and stayin true to what you do—it is through my engagement with you that I have become firmly convinced that culture is the revolution” [sic] (Anderson; Keyes *Rap Music* 157; Alim *Roc the Mic Right* 23). The Universal Zulu Nation gives artists that can be described as conscious, that is, expressing political critique, a template that is not only African-American (even as the continued use of Zulu implies honouring Black heritage).

Such explicit naming of fellow artists, fans and consumers as a ‘nation’ is reminiscent of Benedict Anderson’s landmark notion of an imagined community. Although he specifically considered the development of nationalism as it becomes concrete in a state and institutions, his emphasis on the imagined element of a nation—“...it is *imagined* because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion”—is reflected in declarations of identification with the hip hop nation that not only artists, but also scholars, perform (Anderson 6). This is particularly so in a nation whose boundaries are ‘Universal’ and therefore vague.

Along with variations on ‘nation’, a final term related to conscious hip hop is that of Black Muslim rap (Aidi; Alim “Re-Inventing Islam”; Khabeer; Maira; Miah and Kaira). Consciousness for these rappers is a contested notion, but keeping Islamic and Black identity foremost in mind when contemplating political struggle is of benefit (Aidi 110-112).

Artists described as conscious Islamic rappers include Q-Tip and Mos Def²²; those who noticeably reference the Nation of Islam include Afrika Bambaataa, Big Daddy Kane, Paris, Eric B and Rakim; and those described as Five Percenters include Busta Rhymes, Wu Tang Clan, Brand Nubian and Mobb Deep (Aidi 110-112).

Together the terms conscious, street-conscious, nation-conscious, hip hop nation, and conscious Muslim hip hop overlap, and some artists are placed in more than one category. Yet a common attribute to all of these categories is that the artists included are aware that they belong to a group, sometimes identified as Black, and they speak out for group members' political concerns. This echoes Paul Gilroy's contemplation of the political agency found in Black music:

The power of music in developing black struggles by communicating information, organising consciousness, and testing out or deploying the forms of subjectivity which are required by political agency, whether individual or collective, defensive or transformational, demands attention to both the formal attributes of this expressive culture and its distinctive *moral* basis (*The Black Atlantic* 36) [italics in original].

A “*moral* basis” suggests that celebrating some examples of hip hop as ‘conscious’ is congruent with seeing it as a Black music; a place for “testing out and deploying the forms of subjectivity which are required by political agency” (Gilroy *The Black Atlantic* 36). This suggests that Cornel West’s framing of gangsta rap as “nihilist” and amoral places it in opposition (West).

The emergence of the distinct genre of gangsta rap in late 1987 to early 1988 is described by deGenova, who cited the impact of Boogie Down Productions’ *Criminal Minded*, Schooly D’s *Smoke Some Kill*, Ice-T’s *Rhyme Pays*, and *Straight Outta Compton* by Niggers with Attitude (NWA) (106). The use of the stereotypes of Black male gangsters who ‘smoke some kill’ or are ‘criminally minded’ has been characterised as regressive and pandering to a White audience; “[t]he cut-outs that had once been functional in justifying

²² Also known as Yasiin Bey, and formerly as Dante, or as he said onstage, “I am Mos Def Yasiin Bey Dante” (Acclaim and Soulfest).

oppression and captivity were dusted off and brought back into service, this time by blacks themselves” (Cashmore *The Black Culture Industry* 171).

‘Dusting off’ these stereotypes has been taken seriously. Cornel West went so far as to view gangsta rappers as symptomatic of “nihilism in Black America” (West). This view gives a tragic undercurrent to readings of gangsta rap (deGenova; Kubrin; West). The disappointment in readings of gangsta rap that figure the genre as nihilist is palpable:

Ignored in rap songs demanding respect, spouting nihilism, anger and other expressions and actions of modern youth is the truth regarding the detrimental forces of urbanization in post-civil rights America that promised so much, yet failed to deliver (Lewis 2).

This suggests that the “truth” that these gangsta rappers are failing to point out are structural social and economic forces; they are not ‘conscious’ enough if they “spout” nihilism and anger in response to their individual experiences of these forces. This quote from Lewis also suggests *his* disappointment in “post-civil rights America” for not “delivering” more equality for Black people, yet gangsta rappers seen to be ignoring the ‘correct’ way to respond to this disappointing situation. Other scholars’ disappointment after the hopeful heights of the civil rights protest era means that they see gangsta rap (and its commercialised relative) as a “culture of compensation that self-consciously salves the misery of the disempowered and subordinated” (Gilroy *The Black Atlantic* 85). Salving misery, it seems, is not the correct political use of hip hop.

These criticisms of gangsta rappers as not being politically helpful for Black people suggest assumptions about what would ‘politically helpful’ would look and sound like. Some gangsta rappers have responded to criticism by arguing that their violent themes are realistic (TEIMULTIMEDIA), which suggests that, in fact, by highlighting a reality, a “confrontational” type of “protest music” *is* being performed (Decker; Stapleton 225). That is, “in terms of resistance, hip-hop provided a forum from which black youth can portray what it means to be black and young in America and protest against it” (Stapleton 222).

This suggests that the confronting use of gangster roles, violent images, and lyrics about drug-dealing that some see as politically unhelpful stereotypes can actually be a form of political critique, as both Decker and Stapleton argue. Distributing images and behaviour by musicians that aim to confront has a precursor in the management of the Sex Pistols by Malcolm McLaren, and his idea that “publicity could be used to anarchic effect ... [s]elling such vileness ... would genuinely disseminate a disruptive, rebellious influence to the kids” (Harron 201).

While confrontational, and therefore a kind of protest music, gangsta denies listeners hope, refuses the idea that the “finest songs ... [offer] hope of deliverance from suffering”, because regardless of music performance, the social “game” of surviving in the ghetto, “and its rap, crack, and ‘playa’ forms” remains (Stapleton 225; Collins 916). Reading gangsta rap’s narratives of violence, drug dealing and prostitution as realistic and “descriptive” (Maher) can emphasise that no-one wins these “games” due to larger structural inequalities; particularly not the ‘playa’ ghetto residents (Collins 916). This is not hopeful, which, for some, may be confronting.

Yet presenting this ‘confronting’ realism can in fact be seen as a political position on lived structural inequality. That is,

Gangster rap is not at all anomalous to the consideration of hip-hop music as a creative form of Black expression. Nor is gangster rap any less a potential vehicle for the articulation of a Black-identified oppositional politics” (deGenova 111).

In addition to the idea that gangsta rap offers realism instead of hope, some scholars have given credit to the strategic and innovative entrepreneurship of its figures. For example, Eithne Quinn detailed the development of gangsta rap (particularly in late 1980s to mid-1990s Los Angeles) in the context of increasing police brutality and rates of incarceration for young Black men, which, together with very high unemployment due to the decline of manufacturing jobs and the rise of low-skilled service ‘McJobs’, created a

“penitentiary culture”, in the words of the rapper, Coolio (Quinn 47). The rise in ‘zero tolerance’ policing, predominantly affecting young Black men in inner cities, can be linked to the

renewed economic and culture importance [of cities] as sites of accumulation, speculation, and innovative profit making. For cities to work as such, they must be, or at least appear and feel, safe. If the economic restructuring of the eighties and nineties intensified urban poverty, it also created new, gilded spaces that are increasingly threatened by poverty (Parenti 70).

With this context in mind, gangsta rap spectacularly responds to this fear of poverty, and therefore, in fact, can be seen as a confrontational protest music, one that offers resistance and opposition to such “new, gilded spaces” (Parenti 70). Yet, turning performances of ‘ghetto culture’ (whether cast as realistic or spectacularised) into a commercial transaction can also be seen as “innovative profit making”, congruent with the capitalist policies that are inculcated in the maintenance of ghetto conditions (Parenti 70). A telling example is given by Quinn, who describes one of the first tracks that would come to be seen as gangsta: a novel commercial collaboration between St Ides liquor company and rapper Ice Cube. Cube performed outsourced creative labour for St Ides by promoting an alcoholic product for consumption, and was proud about selling his performance of ghetto life to these commercials (Quinn 1-5). This is an example of an MC deploying a hip hop personal brand in a cross-branding exercise with a company, where the very performance celebrates Cube’s own hustle in ‘getting the gig’ and building his reputation as hardcore, like that of the malt liquor.

Rappers selling a performance of a ghetto persona for commercial purposes can be seen as a creative, agentive use the cultural material at hand, which can include racialised (not racist) stereotypes. A precursor of this is the use of the figure of Stagger Lee/Stagolee by Black musicians (Brown; deGenova 122; Marcus; Munby); a “bad man motif [which] figures prominently in Black American folk culture as a symbol of resistance to racism and white oppression” (Lewis 1). Drawing attention to the mythological figures of

gangsta rap and its precursors suggests that, although structural explanations of gangsta's birth and popularity in a post-civil-rights era have a place, there is also an imaginative element in gangsta representations.

An example of reading gangsta performance as imaginative appears in Michael S. Collins's discussion of deceased gangsta rapper Biggie Smalls'²³. Collins asserted that "[t]he source of [Biggie's] dramatic vocabulary ... was the gangster rap and gangster movies that gave him a literary lineage ... and the Bible ... of which the whole gangster ethic (and aesthetic) is a kind of distorted mirror image (913). In this view, Black men who assume a gangster persona are imaginatively putting on a mask, or displaying "bravado" (E. Anderson 292). Doing this has been described as a strategic response to the "everyday struggle" of living in "neighbourhoods from which opportunities have been vacuumed by structural changes in the economy and in ideological attitudes toward poverty" (Collins 912-3). Collins also testified to the impact of rappers' "flow" ... "[f]or it is from "flow"—whether the rapper's, the writer's, or the demagogue's—that all representation and all justification comes (Collins 912-3). Performing a 'flow' about the ghetto for commercial gain has been valorised as a politically strategic response to poverty and the devastating economic policies of the Reagan and George Bush (Senior) eras (Quinn 44).

deGenova, Quinn and Collins are notable exceptions to the tendency by some scholars to cast gangsta rap as politically unhelpful for marginalised Black people. Their explorations of gangsta's creativity and flow see the use of 'ghetto stereotypes' as strategic and public political work. However, some scholarly considerations of hip hop genre have still placed gangsta rap as the foil to conscious hip hop's implicitly preferable

²³ Also known as Biggie and the Notorious B.I.G.

political statements (Lewis; Stavrias; West). A summary of the qualities attributed to either conscious or gangsta MCs in such accounts can be set out as follows (Figure 10):

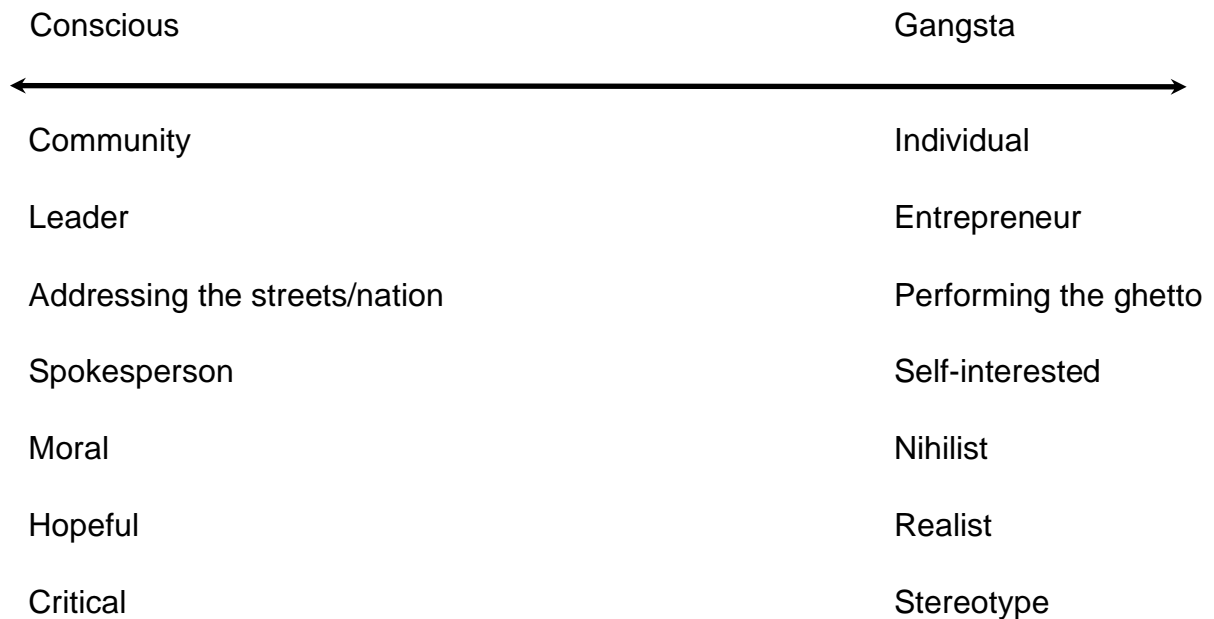


FIGURE 10. MC QUALITIES AND HIP HOP GENRE CONTINUUM.

Some scholars have explicitly embraced the ‘conscious’ qualities, such as hope and addressing the ‘streets’ (Keyes *Rap Music*; Stavrias; Alim “Street Conscious Copula Variations”). Others explicitly criticise the stereotypes used by gangsta MCs (Cashmore *The Black Culture Industry*). This sees gangsta rap as typifying the individualist response to ghetto conditions, that is, the best escape from inequality is by climbing a ladder out of the ghetto to individual wealth (by any means). Conscious hip hop is associated by the scholars already reviewed with the idea that the best response to the problems of living in the ghetto are to be found in hopeful messages, and by communal means. The qualities listed here are those connected with arguments in the academic literature reviewed that characterise hip hop as containing political critique, and which endorse or criticise the way such political critique is enacted. Not all hip hop genres are represented.

However, a strict demarcation between the qualities attributed to conscious and gangsta genres does not hold when considering some hip hop tracks²⁴. For example, a

²⁴ Further, some MCs, such as Paris, present outright political militancy, which is not covered here.

key track that pre-dates debate around conscious or gangsta genres is “The Message” by Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five (Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five feat. Melle Mel and Duke Bootee). It tells of the distress of living in the ghetto, and its warning refrain, “don’t–push–me–cos–I’m–close–to–the–edge” is widely known, as is its production. The track self-reflexively brings a message from the ghetto to the world beyond (Keyes *Rap Music* 212; Youmans 43). Indeed, another term for conscious hip hop, “message rap” was coined following this track’s release (Stapleton 222). The track has been “credited with going beyond the boast/party elements of rap music to become a protest anthem” (Stapleton 222).

Yet “going beyond” these elements to convey a political message does not mean losing a concern with aesthetics: in the music video, the African American male performers embody an aestheticised cool, posing in their clothes as they sit on a front stoop and strut on the street (checkmyvids). This concern with aesthetics and posing in a cool or tough way then became such a widespread part of gangsta (and commercial) rap that the myriad of imitations and spin-offs touched on in the introduction of this thesis came to be. The statement leveraged by Grandmaster Flash, that he was the key early figure to allow MCs to rap over his beats, and then form a rapping performance group, is the very same innovative, entrepreneurial self-promotion that has been critiqued—when enacted by gangsta rappers—as being at the expense of community uplift (Maher). His personal slogan, that he was “[t]he first DJ to use the turntable as an instrument” demonstrates that expressing a political message, creative innovation, and self-promotion can all be found in an artist’s self-branding (grandmasterflash.com). Similarly, the N.W.A track “Fuck Tha Police” from the album *Straight Outta Compton*, “the most successful album of the [early gangsta] period” has also been canonised as a hard-hitting expression of lived experience of racism and police brutality in Los Angeles, which culminated in the Los Angeles

Uprising of 1992 (Cashmore *The Black Culture Industry* 165; Viney). Making this expression spectacular and confronting emphasises that this gangsta album has a political message, and that not only conscious MCs are 'spokespeople'. Similarly, it has been pointed out that Ice Cube's commercial for St. Ides that sold 'gangsta life' a few weeks after appearing in the "socially conscious" film, *Boyz in The Hood* (Haupt "Black Masculinity" 395; Reed, Franti and Adler 154-5).

Another example of artists that have qualities categorised as both conscious and gangsta are Dead Prez. Maher classes them as post-gangsta, as they rap of gangsta themes and present a ghetto reality. Dead Prez's self-produced mixtapes are said to exist in the space between 'knowledge rap' and 'gangsta rap' (Maher 141). Maher's study shows that a clear opposition between gangsta and conscious genres is not always possible, as artists such as Dead Prez rap of the realities of being part of the drug trade while also critiquing it. Dead Prez also argue that crack-cocaine was introduced by the U.S. Government as a part of a conspiracy against African Americans, in order to feed the prison-industrial complex (Maher 144-7). This can be seen as an example of expressing 'consciousness' of structural forces that impact on marginalised people, by linking daily lived experience with the (possible) machinations of the drug trade and government actions (Maher 150). Yet, Dead Prez express political critique without offering any quick answers such as 'one love' and without the moralised rhetoric attributed to conscious hip hop.

On the surface, the three artists considered in this thesis make use of a conscious MC role. However, the qualities attributed to either conscious or gangsta figures, such as being a spokesperson or self-interested, hopeful or realistic, moral or nihilist, addressing a group in order to raise their 'consciousness' or only interested in their own 'hustle' will be

examined in the case studies to see if they are in fact in opposition. Another key aspect that has impact on the political import of MCs performances is their use of gender roles.

Hip Hop Gender Politics

DJ Kool Herc, Afrika Bambaataa, N.W.A, Public Enemy, Biggie, Mos Def, Dead Prez, MC Narcy, Organics, and Wire MC—most of the artists discussed in the literature of the previous section are male, female artists Little G, Eve, Bahamadia and performance poet Sonia Sanchez are the exceptions. However, some academic studies of hip hop have specifically focused on the participation of women (Guevara).

For example, attention has been paid to “herstories”—as opposed to histories—of Bronx women in hip hop (LaBennett). LaBennett sought to insert the stories of Roxanne Shante and Sha Rock²⁵ into the “creation narrative” of hip hop in the Bronx that gives primary importance to male figures such as DJ Kool Herc (109-10). Retrospective valorisation has also been given by feminist academics to the first all-female DJ and MC crew Mercedes Ladies (Sher; Shomari 9-10), along with highlighting instances of women rapping in early 1980s releases by Blondie and the White R ’n’ B singer, Teena Marie (Hobson and Bartlow 4).

Recognising and honouring women’s contribution to the creation of early hip hop has been a recurring battle, waged by artists and participants “since the genre’s inception” (Guevara; Hobson and Bartlow 3). This suggests that the very presence of women in hip hop is a political act; as is the scholarly work to make them visible. For example, Millie Jackson performed ‘love raps’ in the same period as Isaac Hayes and Barry White, and has been hailed as the “mother of all female rappers” in an academic context—as well as

²⁵ Sha Rock may be the first female hip hop MC, who performed in the crew The Funky Four.

in a Sprite television commercial broadcast in the United States (Pough 164, 238). Female African American MCs such as Roxanne Shante, Queen Latifah and Missy Elliott have also been valued for their contribution to hip hop culture and popular culture more broadly by Gwendolyn Pough (Pough).

Some scholars have chosen to focus on non-performing women in the music industry to unearth hidden narratives of women participating in hip hop. For example, that ‘godfather of godfathers’, DJ Kool Herc, was inspired to throw his early block parties by his sister, Cindy Campbell, who also organised and promoted them. This fact was foregrounded by Oneka LaBennett in her oral history accounts of women in hip hop in the Bronx, whereas Jeff Chang only briefly mentions it and it is absent in Paul Gilroy (LaBennett 111-2). La Bennett’s use of the term “creation narrative” highlights the ways in which the repetitive story of hip hop’s origins both repeatedly excludes women and grants godfathers a hallowed status, one that is explicitly gendered male (111).

An exception to the focus on male figures as important to hip hop’s development is found in writing about Sylvia Robinson. Robinson produced the first commercial hip hop single, “The Rappers Delight” by the Sugar Hill Gang, in 1979, and also directed the video for “The Message” (Sugar Hill Gang; Keyes *Rap Music* 212). After her death in 2011, this Black female entrepreneur attracted online commentary that granted her a small place in the canon of early hip hop figures (Moody “Sylvia Robinson”). Robinson is an example of a woman taking on an entrepreneurial role in hip hop, and she is attributed with the original idea of a creating commercial rap record, and pulling together a ‘gang’ for the project (Moody “Sylvia Robinson”). This story of a Black woman taking up Nixon’s call for the development of “Black capitalism” fittingly includes a later legal fight over the trademark of the name Sugar Hill Gang from men claiming to be original members (Anthony; Cashmore *The Black Culture Industry* 155).

Another woman given a small note for her management work is Queen Latifah, who is said to have discovered Naughty by Nature for Tommy Boy Records, and who then later formed her own production company and produced “rhythm and blues artist Zhané, solo artist Apache, and herself”, before going on to her subsequent work as a feature film actor and daytime television talk show host (Keyes *Rap Music* 112).

Focusing on other female participants in hip hop, as MCs, dancers, clothing designers, or hip hop theatre performers, highlights both their perspectives as artists (A-Love et al) and the way that hip hop forms a part of their life narrative (LaBennett). Hobson and Bartlow also sought to counter the canonising of male musical genius by giving attention to female vocalists; a form of musical performance and recording that is “often ranked lower in scholarly and social prestige than men’s instrumental music skills” (2). These studies of female vocal performance, even of female musical “genius”, form part of a Black feminist or womanist project, which has focused on Black female hip hop artists (Pough). Honouring Black women’s performances emphasises that their identities are intersectional; that both their ethnicity and gender are important considerations that need to be highlighted (Crenshaw).

The case study of Ladi6 in this thesis contributes to this body of scholarship that attends to women’s “vocal and corporeal performances” in an intersectional manner (Hobson and Bartlow 2). Undertaking a case study of a Samoan female artist from Aotearoa-New Zealand is a part of the response, or at least the parallel co-existence, to the export of commercial hip hop from the United States, which “markets music as a profitable entity while simultaneously inculcating worldwide audiences with dominant ideologies of race, class, gender, sexuality and nationality” (Berry; Hobson and Bartlow 2). The potential for Ladi6 to resist these “dominant ideologies” makes her an appropriate subject to ask my research question about the political critique of conscious artists.

Political critique *has* been said to exist in the work of hip hop artists who perform a feminist perspective, such as all-female crew *Las Krudas* (The Crude) from Cuba who, in the words of one member, Pelusa, identify as “poor, women, artists, Cuban, Black, hip hop” (Armstead “Growing the Size” 131). The case study of Ladi6 to follow also takes up the call to meet “the continuing need for more studies on women’s music that incorporate intersectional analysis and that expand the critical lens to include a global perspective” (Hobson and Bartlow 6). This need remains, as many studies of ‘global hip hop’ are strikingly dominated by a focus on male participants (Mitchell “Global Noise”; Terkourafi).

A further dimension to intersectional analysis of female artists is possible by including the use of spiritual ideas in their identities. “Hotep and Hip-Hop” specifically considered the place of Black Muslim female artists in hip hop (McMurray). Considering the “religious identities” of figures such as the African-American nu-soul artist Erykah Badu is a precursor to the case study on Ladi6 (Hobson and Bartlow 8). Some other female artists have been seen as conscious, that is, imparting wisdom or being positive role models. One example of this is found in discussion of African-American singer, MC, and actor Lauryn Hill, where her debut solo album, *The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill*, was upheld as a peak moment for “hip hop feminism” (Hobson and Bartlow 5). In this study, Lauryn’s “ascendancy” was seen as short-lived (Hobson and Bartlow 5). However successors and peers of the United States hip hop and soul’s queens and ladies can be found, who also embody, sing and rap of female ‘liberation’ (as does Hill in her recent re-emergence). In Ladi6’s case, this has been part of a sustained career as an MC and singer, both in groups and as a soloist. This study of Ladi6’s thus contributes to a small section of popular music studies that considers women of colour in hip hop-related genres who use a religious or spiritual identity, and goes further, to question the limits of this as political work.

Female figures such as Erykah Badu and Lauryn Hill who use hip hop roles that seem wise or 'spiritual' exist alongside other popular music productions that seem to "equate hypersexuality with feminism" (Hobson and Bartlow 12). Women performers in hip hop videos have been used as examples in the debate over the "sexualisation of culture" (Gill "The Sexualisation of Culture?" 483).

The word 'sexualisation' is "used to capture the growing sense of Western societies as saturated by sexual representations and discourses, and in which pornography has become increasingly influential and porous, permeating 'mainstream' contemporary culture (Gill "The Sexualisation of Culture?" 483). The most relevant example of this is in music videos and advertising of the post-1980's MTV era, where 'a "porno chic" aesthetic can be seen' (Andsager 34; Gill "The Sexualisation of Culture?" 483).

More specifically, a study of the 41 best-selling U.S. hip hop videos from 2007-2008 concluded that "[h]ip-hop's focus on conspicuous consumption, buttressed by the success of entrepreneurial rap moguls, has merged with strip club culture to create a new gender relation based on sexual transaction" (Hunter 15). It has been further argued that the link between this new gender relation and a consumption culture creates a normalisation of a "pornographic gaze" towards women of colour, who are most associated with being hip hop video dancers (Hunter and Soto 174). Much like the judgement of gangsta rap as an improper way to express political critique, the merging of conspicuous consumption with sexual transaction, or the normalising of a pornographic gaze, is here suggested to be an undesirable method of performing political critique.

Some readings of female rappers have seen their very inclusion in hip hop as a political act, with further attention paid to their performance of gender roles. For example, Queen Latifah's "female masculinity" has been attributed with a subversive impact in the heteronormative, male dominated field of hip hop (Pough). Contrastingly, Lil' Kim's

hypersexuality has been interpreted as agentive in Collins' study of gangsta productions (Collins 910-12). These readings suggest that these women are expressing political critique whether they are conforming to or performing against the stereotypes for Black women. For example, Foxy Brown's performances have been read as a savvy capitalisation on the roles available for Black women (Pough 18).

The context of these readings is that, as hip hop's audiences became Whiter, the racial caricatures increased—in particular the dominance of the so-called 'hypermasculine' Black male surrounded by submissive, objectified Black women (Hunter and Soto 184-5). This suggests that the politics that racialised gender roles 'sell' are in play in commercial hip hop. In the Black culture industry, and particularly in hip hop, "the image of the oversexed, undercivilized black woman had been a serviceable one; even more serviceable, perhaps, when projected by black men" (Cashmore *The Black Culture Industry* 169). This suggests that the presence of women in hip hop productions (particularly gangsta-influenced commercial hip hop) is not seen as politically critical (E. Davis; Hunter and Soto; Morgan; Pough).

This suggestion is made in a study of the labour conditions, and their political importance, in the production of booty videos. These videos have been described as creating "gendered hierarchies", which "discourage women from supporting one another, which, from a black feminist perspective, does not accommodate an ethic of care and personal responsibility" (Fitts 211). Further analysis of the "pornification" of hip hop and the intersections between hip hop and African American hip hop-pornography productions have been seen by Mireille Miller-Young as producing a "sexual economy of illicit eroticism" (3, 5).

These studies have centred on readings of, commercial hip hop or "mainstream rap music" which

is most easily commodified because it represents ideas of Blackness that are in line with dominant racist and sexist ideologies ... the images of Black male violence and aggression that dominate mainstream rap music are highly marketable in America because of already existing ideologies of racism that long ago named the Black male as supreme aggressor and physical and sexual threat. Similarly, the images of sexually available Black women that pervade rap music are marketable because of already existing ideologies that designated Black women as hypersexual and morally obtuse (Peoples 24).

In a similar fashion to scholars who endorse conscious hip hop's political work, some feminist scholars have stressed the need to 'uplift' their sistren who embody the video ho, "jezebel" (Radford-Hill), or "vixen" (Hunter 17). This uplift is defined as occurring through "a political education and the tools of critical analysis" (Peoples 29). "A political education" suggests that these women's performances are not already political, or that they are not political in the correct way. However, this approach has itself been criticised for upholding a "politics of respectability" that encourages Black women's silence and "disassembling" around rape and sexual exploitation (Reid-Brinkley 1085).

Coined by Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, "respectability politics" describes self-policing within minority groups and is an important concept when considering the use of gender roles and whether they are deployed to express political critique in hip hop (Higginbotham). Respectability politics, or censoring minorities or groups of people made to feel different to a so-called norm for their behaviour, has been criticised as being based on conservative judgements that do not challenge fundamental power disparities. Further, encouraging individuals to lift themselves out of poverty and oppression by virtue of their behaviour and self-presentation places responsibility on them to overcome significant structural inequality. It also moves attention towards judging individuals through a self-policing action present in, for example, Black and queer communities at the expense of other forms of political action (Harris; Higginbotham).

A further problem with the notion of 'respectability' is that its "twenty-first-century version... [also] works to accommodate neoliberalism" (Harris 33). This is specifically

seen in the emphasis on preparing individuals for a competitive market economy, rather than on communities of people helping each other out of economic and social oppression. In this sense the idea that conscious music and/or women's presentation of their bodies is a political tool that can encourage pride and social change finds limits in its accommodation of respectability politics, and the corresponding neoliberal emphasis on individualisation.

Nevertheless, conscious hip hop includes performances of gender roles that merit analysis. In this way this thesis expands the scope of previous studies of hip hop and gender by addressing the requirements of genre in hip hop—as read through the frame of self-branding. Broadly, images and lyrics that perpetuate heterosexual men dominating women are not such a valuable thematic currency in conscious hip hop as in the commercial hip hop that some previous studies have focused on. Urthboy and Ladi6 are not positioned to benefit from the stereotypes of African American gendered sexual roles, and, as a Black man, K'naan has a contradictory approach to the phenomenon that “pimp, player, hustler and badman figures [are] vernacular sites of identification and legibility for African American men” (Miller-Young 273-4).

Indeed, even if conscious hip hop is not overtly claimed as a genre distinction, many artists outside the U.S have used the fact that they are not aligned with the gangsta rapper role (seen in Figure 10), and its play of a Black male hypermasculinity supported by the bodies of Black females, as a point of distinction (Campbelltown Arts Centre; Mathieson; Miller-Young 273). As LaBennett writes of female Bronx MC *La Bruja*, “[t]he idea that hip hop is predicated on violence or misogyny is not part of her artistic process” (LaBennett 118).

Ronni Armstead's study of Afro-Cuban female rap crew Las Krudas describes them as “[m]arginalized within the predominantly male hip-hop industry” of Cuba (Hobson and

Bartlow), their street performances read as “oppositional” identity activism, a “kind of theatre of the oppressed” (Armstead "Growing the Size" 106). In contrast, Ladi6 is placed relatively central to the industry of Aotearoa-New Zealand due to her family connections, the ready acceptance of Pacific Islanders as hip hop artists, and her years spent supporting other artists in the Aotearoa-New Zealand music industry more broadly. Studying her therefore provides a counter-example to female hip hop artists being seen as marginal to a music industry, as a part of the project of questioning if she performs political critique.

Armstead asserted that “female rappers” such as Las Krudas are “engaging in transgressive spatial practice” and therefore “helping to disrupt the classificatory eye’s orientalist gaze” (“Las Krudas” 130). This builds on the work of feminist geographers who claimed, “space is not merely an arena *in which* social life is produced, but *through which* it is produced and reproduced” (Rose G. 19). This thesis applies this idea to Ladi6’s live performances to explore the production and reproduction of gender roles in public venues, to question whether this is political critique. Similarly, Ladi6’s music videos are included in my analysis, as “[m]usic videos and magazine covers are arguably the most gendered spaces in the music industry”, and are therefore important items to considering an artist’s political critique (Lieb 126).

The success of Ladi6 in crafting a career outside the United States represents a modest challenge to the situation of mainstream rap in the United States, where,

[a]lthough chart-topping women rappers were common in the early 1990s (Salt-n-Pepa, Queen Latifah, and MC Lyte, for example), their presence has been greatly diminished as commercial rap has become increasingly homogenous ... In fact, no female rapper has had a top ten single in over five years ... Whiter audiences have coincided with less interest in the voices of black women rappers in the past decade (Hunter 17).

By contrast, Ladi6 is marketed as bringing a Pacific lady’s perspective to hip hop, and her gender performance is centred on vocal and performance skills, rather than on

catering to the “pornographic” gaze (Hunter and Soto). This serves to provide a counter example to analysis of mainstream U.S hip hop that saw an explosive increase in women of color as “video dancers ... represented as interchangeable bodies instead of active voices” (Hunter 18). This suggests that artists such as Ladi6 can form their own template for how to express political critique through their gender identity, which does not necessarily rely on the work of U.S. artists.

Being considered as an “active voice” echoes the idea that female artists that are often seen as politically critical may also be aligned with the markers of the conscious genre:

‘hip hop culture’ can seen as a potentially transformative social movement ... while ... being aware of how mainstream hip hop is interpreted as a site of violence and misogyny, they view hip hop music and culture as a positive political tool for women and girls (LaBennett 125).

This thesis adds to previous considerations of gender in hip hop by emphasising the importance of self-branding for female musicians. In her research on the branding of female pop music stars between 1981 and 2012, Kristin Lieb finds that female pop stars are marketed as short-term, predominantly visual brands (33). By interviewing gatekeepers, or those within the music industry who have the power to shape the careers of these artists, Lieb traces the pressures brought to bear on women musicians to (re)package themselves for visual consumption. In the promotion of these performers, music operates as a “tertiary concern, behind the body and the star’s ability to use it to maximum effect in videos, on magazine covers, in endorsement deals, and on stage while on tour” (11). The personal brands of these stars are bluntly characterised as “sex-first” (33).

While Lieb’s work focuses on female pop stars, many of her conclusions bear on this thesis, and particularly on the case study of Ladi6. Lieb specified that the impact of MTV was that images became increasingly important for pop stars’ brands. This

observation also holds true for smaller-scale, independent artists such as Ladi6, due to the inter-textual online platforms through which musicians now engage (Andersen and Frenz; Lieb; Oullet). In this era, artist images in the form of profile pictures, avatars, and promotional photographs often travel independently of their music. Therefore, the pressure to package oneself as a visual brand that is “sex-first” may still be felt by independent female artists.

Ladi6’s self-branding will be discussed in this context. Female artists who work on a smaller scale to those discussed by Lieb may be able to negotiate the pressures of being a visual brand in a different manner. Independent artists not signed to major labels, and those whose merchandising efforts are also independent of major corporate players may also brand themselves differently from those contending for pop-star status. This will be investigated in the case study of Ladi6, intertwined as it is with her relationship to the conscious hip hop genre and to the soul music style.

Lieb’s observation that female pop stars and their handlers “borrow ... wardrobe, accessory, and hairstyle choices from stars who went before them to position themselves among past successes in the minds of consumers” provides support for the coming analysis of Ladi6’s use of the role of ‘lady’ (30). Lieb concluded from her interview data that there is a lifecycle of different roles that female pop stars can move between. This “lifecycle model” has some complexity, but starts with “good girl”, progresses to “temptress”, and then may move to “diva”, “whore”, “exotic”, “provocateur” or “hot mess” (78). Much less inhabited roles include “gay icon”, “protected status”, “change of focus” or “legend” (Lieb 78). While female hip hop artists do not necessarily follow the same path, this model is a useful counterpoint to my study of Ladi6’s gendered self-branding. In particular, the apparent opposition between the ‘good girl’ and the ‘temptress’ s analogous

to my consideration of Ladi6 in the context of roles for female artists such as ‘lady’ or ‘bitch’.

The other key aspect of the study of gender in hip hop that bears on this study is the work considering masculinity performed by male participants. While much of this literature centres around the performance of Black male heterosexual “hypermasculinities” in hip hop within a U.S context (Miller-Young 271-5), this has also been characterised as Black men meeting the need to adopt a violent persona as a “survival tactic” in inner-city neighbourhoods (deGenova; E. Anderson; Kubrin).

The nihilism read in gangsta rap, already touched on, is explicitly defined as masculine, with gangsta rap being seen as a “masculinist genre” (deGenova 96). Gangsta is likened to the earlier literary work of Richard Wright, particularly in the novel, *Native Son* (deGenova 95). Wright said that in *Native Son* he wanted to deny readers “the consolation of tears” and, particularly, he did not want to appeal to a female audience (deGenova 96). This idea of writing or performing for other men is reflected in the idea that gangsta is a masculinist genre: made by men and for men. The compelling central character of *Native Son*, Bigger, works with ideas of Black men as the ultimate violent, rapacious threat to White women. Like gangsta rappers, Wright uses the ‘bad man’ stereotype. Wright stated that he needed to write Bigger “as he was” and refuse the respectability politics of the African-American middle class (deGenova 95). The threat present in roles used by Black men in gangsta rap will be considered as a part of the context that the three artists studied here situate their work against, particularly in the case of K’naan.

The ‘hypermasculinity’ that some scholars have perceived in performances of male gangsta rappers echoes a discomfort with a nihilistic, threatening figure that cannot ever be respectable. The excessive virility, brutality and savagery stereotypically attributed to

Black men in hierarchical notions of race are uncomfortably played out by gangsta rappers, hence the response of some to see them as 'hypermasculine', and their phallocentric, embodied fury as out of bounds (Baldwin; Lewis 2). Tone it down, the subtext goes, we will never get anywhere like that. Even further out of bounds is the straight-forward, from a capitalist view, perception of an association between commercial hip hop stars and porn productions. This

sexual bacchanal ... illuminates the contemporary significance of sexuality, specifically an abundant, unrestrained, and commodified sexuality, to black hypermasculinity as it is articulated through illicit eroticism (Miller-Young 273).

The idea that gangsta rap packaged a savage Blackness as particularly consumed by White middle class adolescent males in the 1990s implicated not only racial stereotypes, but importantly, a "sexual violence" (Baldwin 3-4; deGenova 108-9). This sexual aspect has been described as intrinsic to the intra-racial complexity of the reception of gangsta by White boys (Lewis 7). That is, enjoying Black men rapping about, and showing, in differing degrees of detail, how they use and abuse women sexually, was a form of rebelliousness for White adolescent males, even as it relied on stereotypes of Black men also held by the parents they were rebelling against (deGenova 108-9). The legacy of these internationally popular performances of Black masculinity in hip hop is the context which the artists studied here pitch their own brands against. In particular, considering the interplay between the idea of a conscious MC and the performance of masculinity is of use to questioning political critique in MC brands.

The following gives, like Lieb's lifecycle model for female pop stars and Morgan's discussion of roles available for Black women, a list of the roles made available to Black men through hip hop (implicitly, gangsta rap):

The truth is that Black masculinity has historically been framed in notions of Brute Negro, Stud, noble savage, Uncle Tom and Bad Nigger. In the modern world, sports culture and music frame Black masculinity as Hustler, Militant/Bad Nigger, Super Jock, or Womanizer, lazy, flashy, greedy, violent, and dumb (Lewis 7).

Questioning whether Urthboy or K'naan make use of these roles, or else oppose them, is a part of discussing political critique in their brands. In particular, the fact that Blackness and (hyper)masculinity are presumed to be entwined in depictions of, for example, the hustler or womanizer is brought to bear on the gender performance of Urthboy and K'naan.

The idea of 'hypermasculine' behaviour in lyrics and videos is often tacit, with few scholars breaking down what actually *is* hypermasculine about these performances. For example, Thabiti Lewis conflates the Black public figures of sportsmen and rappers:

The hyper-masculine representations in hip-hop narratives and athletes playing performances and personas are also a direct response to a repressive culture; a response to, or attempted compensation for a perceived loss of power, potency, or manhood in the wake of the real perceived power that controls their worlds. But this is rarely articulated (2).

The perceived loss of power, potency, or manhood was addressed by "Black Power discourses in the 1960s [which] ... turned repeatedly to the historical legacy of race and gender in order to define and articulate a strident black masculinity, one that worked specifically to negate lynching and castration's corporeal and cultural effect" (Wiegman 85). It has then been argued that "hip-hop's hyper-masculine façade owes a debt to the Black Power movement which defined the politics of race within the metaphors of phallic power" (Lewis 8). The use of "the hyper prefix [in hypermasculinity found in the performance of Black male hip hop artists] suggests that there is a comparison to an essential form of masculinity ... [which is] White, heterosexual, and professional" (Pitt and Sanders 37). It is often implicit that hypermasculinity discussed in hip hop and gangsta rap is pointing to a problem with 'Black masculinity' itself (Pitt and Sanders 39).

Some scholars have taken the framing of expressions of Black masculinity in hip hop further, to outline that

Hip-hop femininities and masculinities are subject to market concerns of white supremacist, patriarchal, multinational, corporate capitalism and are positioned as marginal to the means of material production and institutional political power (Miller-Young 263).

That is, even as performances of Black masculinity in hip hop productions were globally distributed, Black men are kept marginal in social systems that cast their masculinity as oppositional. This performance, then, repeats White patriarchal notions of manhood (hooks 60). The idea of a marginal masculinity that performs a politically oppositional stance is considered when studying Urthboy and K'naan.

The self-consciousness of performing masculinity or 'hypermasculinity' in hip hop productions rests on a relational claim. In this way the performance of rapper's 'hypermasculinity' needs women's bodies, as the

heightened awareness of self in the "booty video" depends very much on the "booty," or a particular representation of femininity, which then shapes the masculine identities of rappers and video directors (Fitts 212).

Much like the assumptions about the political uses of genre implicated in studies of either 'conscious' or 'gangsta' artists, those selected for study in global hip hop papers (read hip hop outside the U.S.) often make a distinction between themselves and the gender roles on display in gangsta rap and commercial hip hop. For example, Stavrias quotes Australian Indigenous male MC, Wire, saying that he does not identify with gangsta or commercial figures, but that he understands why (presumably male) participants of his school workshops do, and why his younger self did (50). Perullo establishes entrenched sexism in Dar Es-Salaam in order to highlight how the rapper Mr II speaks out against it in his lyrics about a prostitute (*Hooligans and Heroes* 91). By either not imitating commercial or gangsta rappers, or rapping about gender inequality experienced by women, these artists are being placed in opposition to their 'hypermasculine' Black American

counterparts. The case studies on Urthboy and K'naan will consider if they make use of a similar opposition.

In contrast, by summarising lyrical themes, Barrer glosses that, “[w]hen discussing women, the lyrics of Slovak rap exude machismo and sexism; women are appraised targets of sexual objectification” (69). This machismo does not seem to produce the worry prompted by the hypermasculinity attributed to Black male rappers. Ian Maxwell went further, and asserted that masculinity was central to the hip hop scene in Western Sydney, Australia:

The Hip Hop world I encountered was for the *boyz*, a masculinized, even phallocentric, world in which young men performed, rapped, broke, boasted, *bombed*, leaving their *phat* tags to mark their presence, hung out, strutted, posed with their legs thrust out and their hands hooked in low-slung pockets, fingers brushing their groins. Where young men talked about *their* Community, Culture, Nation (33).

The homosocial nature of the world that Maxwell studied, as well as the embodiment of the young men in it, excludes women, even as there is also discussion of hip hop as a lifestyle of inclusion. In this sense Maxwell brings some nuance to the idea that masculinity (or hypermasculinity) in hip hop is defined by performing domination over women:

Blaze understands that homophobia and sexism are *bad*, but often his own critical practice ... strayed into the pejorative use of “homophobic” and “sexist” stereotypes. And while the discourses of tolerance and respect were pervasive throughout the scene, the Hip Hop world was one that decidedly privileged the masculine over the feminine (165).

Including these contradictions is important, as is including the ways that performing (hyper)masculinity in hip hop interacts with discourses of sexuality and race. Therefore, intersectional analysis of ethnicity, class, location, and genre resource adherence will be undertaken in the following case studies of Ladi6, Urthboy and K'naan's personal brands. Gender is a central aspect of performing identity in hip hop, and is not just an issue when highlighting herstories or discussing 'hypermasculinity'. Gender is also a part of the use of

national and ethnic stereotypes in hip hop, such as the Australian White male larrikin used in Urthboy's personal brand, the Pacific Lady used by Ladi6, and the critical gangsta and troubadour used by K'naan. Including analysis of gender performance is important to questioning political critique by the MCs studied in this thesis.

Hip Hop and the Politics of Place

Another aspect of identity that has political ramifications is individuals' expressions of their 'place'. This has been an important theme in hip hop, and in the scholarly study of hip hop artists. For example, the early Zulu Nation

attracted African-American, Puerto Rican, Afro-Caribbean, and Euro-American youths ...[who] used the conduits of popular culture to bring the expressive forms of their isolated and largely abandoned neighborhoods to an international audience (Lipsitz 26).

U.S. hip hop has been described as already "diasporic" and creating cultural connections between people separated by distance (Springer 105). Hip hop has been seen as being "born global because it erupted in the midst of a *new stage* of globalization" (Kelley xi). The complexity of the notion of hip hop being 'global' has been explored by academic writers.

For example, the study of hip hop as "global noise" has produced many discussions that centre around the local and global aspects of identity for participants from a range of locations (Mitchell *Global Noise*). Condry discussed hip hop's local history and distinctive qualities in Japan, which produced insights regarding the creative interplay between Japanese and African-American language, references, ideas, and accents (Condry). Fink explored the notion of authenticity found in "Japanified" hip hop and the Tokyo venue Club Harlem ("Negotiating Ethnicity"). Another study of hip hop in Britain focused on participants

who experience social marginality and express this through hip hop, who were defined as members of the “British Asian underground” (Huq).

French hip hop has particularly been discussed in light of its connections to Africa and the performance of identities which represent marginalised migrant communities located in the *banlieues* (Aidi; Henelon; Huq). These readings cast such performances of imagined community as a political act (Anderson). Musical connections between Black South Africans and African-Americans have been analysed not only in terms of aesthetics and lyrics, but also the political economy of globally distributed cultural products and the incorporation of these into “the South African symbolic order” (Magubane 226). Hip hop artists in Tanzania have been described as the “children of Arusha”, as inheritors and revivers of the failed anti-imperial political ideals of the Arusha Declaration of a generation before (Lemelle); and as remixers of local language and the roles of “hooligans” or “heroes” (Perullo).

B-boys in Dakar, Senegal, have been interviewed to explore their potential as hip hop cultural agents for their own “social integration rather than continued marginality” (Niang 183). Cuba has also proved to be an apt site for the study of Black diasporic belonging performed in hip hop (Fernandes) as well as a site of transgressive spatial practices by Black female MCs (Armstead “Growing the Size”, “Las Krudas”). This will be considered in relation to Ladi6, Urthboy and K’naan by looking at the ways that they signal connection to local, national, and international places and groups of people.

A way to theorise such complex processes of identification in hip hop is found in H. Samy Alim’s concept of a “mobile matrix”:

There are at least two levels of meaning working simultaneously in Hip Hop’s globalization; the imperative to identify with global Hip Hop (with Black America as a dominant frame of reference for many contexts) and the imperative to create something that pushes local boundaries and distinguishes oneself from both local and global Hip Hop styles (“Translocal Style” 113).

Accordingly, I focus on MCs interacting with these two levels, and delineate the visible (and audible) local, global and African American referents. This study builds on the previous scholarship that analysed the performance of identities in hip hop, and their aspects of ethnicity, gender, and relationship to place, to question if political critique is indeed expressed by MCs who are seen as conscious.

The Branded Self

My project considers three MCs' presentation of gender roles, ethnicity and their relationship to place to question whether political critique is present in their personal brands, and how the very process of self-branding interacts with any political critique that is found. As already mentioned, the notion of self-branding came from the personal development or self-help industry, which was then applied to corporate workers (Gandini 125; Peters). This "personal development" industry used the (ostensibly) "obvious logic" of taking the notion of branding from products and companies and applying it to individuals (Chen 332).

Much like companies seek to make a profit from circulating their brand, the definition of self-branding used here is taken from Alison Hearn, who describes it as "an outer-directed form of self-promotion singularly focused on attracting attention and acquiring cultural and monetary value" ("Radical Eclectic" 317). The idea that attracting attention through self-branding *will* result in acquiring cultural and/or monetary value has moved from the self-help and corporate contexts of the 1990s to become a "central concept in the knowledge economy, indicating those processes of marketization of the self for the empowerment and professional success of the individual" (Gandini 123-4). This cultural context is one that reinforces that branding is necessary for success, as

consumers, employees, and organizations are seen to construct and perform identities and self-concepts, trying out new roles and creating their identity within, and in collaboration with, brand culture (Schroeder 123).

Some individuals do not “construct and perform” a personal brand to the same degree as others. There is a difference between the execution of a public figure’s brand and some people’s interactions online. Developing a personal brand includes using an identifiable name or word, such as “Franchesca Chescaleigh Ramsey”, and a logo and/or images of the individual that are connected to the name, such as professionally photographed promotional pictures. This personal brand then surrounds the works associated with it as they are dispersed and shared. For Ramsey, this includes her videos for BuzzFeed, her appearances on other social commentator’s videos, her debut book, or her appearances at book signings (Franchesca Chescaleigh Ramsey).

However, there can be a slippage between a consciously developed personal brand and the reputation of individuals who do not attend to self-branding to the same degree. This is seen in the fear that a digital trail of one’s public online presence could someday bear on one’s employability, relationship prospects or reputation as a public figure (if one becomes one through career choice or circumstance). The online detritus connected to an individual has the potential to constitute their reputation, and reputation is the “most important asset for the individual brand” (Gandini 125). That is, there *is* a distinction between choosing to develop and maintain a personal brand and the online residue of an individual’s activities who is not “singularly focused” on “self-promotion”. However, to a degree, the context of a “brand culture” as manifest in social media and online platforms means that even if an individual does not develop a personal brand, the same pressure to be reflexively aware of self-presentation within social networks occurs (Schroeder 124).

Emphasising that personal brands are situated within a “brand culture” (Nick Carah uses the term “brandscape”, a terrain which is made tangible at branded music

festivals) that reinforces them, means that they can be considered as “cultural, ideological, and sociological objects” (Carah 8). In this sense ideas and cultural resources expressed through personal brands, such as those of MCs, can be analysed.

In addition, acknowledging that personal brands are located in a brand culture highlights that crafting a personal brand *itself* signals connection to the idea that personal branding is necessary. That is, “self-branding in the knowledge economy is a device for self-promotion for the pursuit of self-realization in a context that reifies entrepreneurialism as the main ideological stance” (Gandini 124). This context, which stems from deindustrialisation, digitization and an assault on unions, has produced people described as the “neoliberal precariat”, whose unstable experience of employment is produced by the lack of a ‘job for life’ (Van Oort). A significant number (thirty-four percent) of surveyed Americans made some or all of their income from freelance work in 2013 (Gandini 126). The precarious nature of employment is ostensibly addressed by the advice to develop a continually refreshed, flexible, but consistent personal brand in order to obtain employment (Gershon) or freelance work in a digital economy (Gandini).

It is not only consumers and employees who are located in a brand culture and encouraged to develop personal brands. The same applies to those who provide creative labour, such as classical musicians. The “prevailing ethos of entrepreneurialism” does not always find a fit with cultural labourers who struggle to embrace the need to promote themselves to be able to cobble together a living in an insecure work environment (Gill “Cool, Creative and Egalitarian?”, “Unspeakable Inequalities”; Scharff 98). Contemporary MCs are also situated within this “context that reifies entrepreneurialism”, that is, which encourages viewing the self as a business to be promoted in order to obtain individual success (Gandini 124). As MCs are individual performers and recording artists who seek to be recognisable in a crowded field, the ideological stance of first and foremost being ‘an

entrepreneur of the self' for the sake of 'empowerment' or 'self-realisation' finds a fit with MCs' activities, even if some conscious MCs may see their work as a political project that is incompatible with self-promotion.

Quite what the idea of empowerment or self-realisation through entrepreneurialism means is vague, but what *is* clear is that, in a brand culture, building a reputation for your 'self' is equated with building value. For example, self-branding by knowledge workers on social media has been discussed as "performative practices of sociality that exist around a shared notion of reputation as the cultural conception of value" (Gandini 124). Similarly, establishing a reputation as a hip hop performer can be seen as largely "equating self-branding with social capital" (Gandini 124). Social capital is not limited to, but includes "the acquisition of economic return via the management of social relationships" (Gandini 125).

Acquiring, and then spending, this social capital—your valuable reputation—is, according to the narrative of self-branding, important for individuals to be successful (whether, for example, an MC makes a personal profit or not). However, a personal brand is not the same as an individual person such as a hip hop artist. Fournier and Herman outlined a model of the phases of a personal brand: "... a person: births a brand; inserts himself or herself into the brand; becomes equal to the brand; becomes greater than the brand; and ultimately becomes less than the brand"²⁶ (Lieb 38). The process of inserting yourself into a brand and then watching as it becomes a distinct, yet abstract, entity (which may have material dimensions) can encourage reflection about how this brand is interacting with those of other individuals within a brand culture.

This is seen in recent definitions of self-branding which emphasise that "reflexivity skills" are important to personal brands (Gandini 125). The importance of reflexivity when

²⁶ This idea is attributed to two unpublished manuscripts by Fournier and Herman which are referred to by Lieb, and are referenced in the Works Cited.

participating in networks has been demonstrated in a study by Hugo Liu, who found that Myspace user profiles were “taste statements” or “taste performances” that were relational by nature (253). The selection and curation of goods and cultural products as an exhibition of taste “is becoming even more prestigious than making goods or services or sounds themselves” (Taylor 417-8). Following from Bourdieu’s exploration of taste, Carah observed that “[t]aste-making practices order social life and reflect the order of social life. In this way, taste and meaning-making are central to the production of the uneven social structures that empower capital accumulation”, and that “[i]rony, reflexivity and playful meaning-making are not the empowering political actions they appear to be” (72, 158). Reflexive taste statements were renamed by Theresa Senft in her study of women broadcasting themselves through web cams as constituting personal “brands” (26).

Like personal brands, the brands of group musical acts may also be referential and exhibit self-awareness. An example is the Australian hip hop group’s name, Thundamentals. The name suggests that the performers respect the ‘fundamentals’ of hip hop, and that their hip hop beats and MCing flow are ‘thunderous’. ‘Thundamentals’ may evoke the colloquial phrase ‘the thunder from down under’, which is a bawdy phrase that can mean phallic, or at least masculine, power. This then reinforces the normalization of young White men being dominant in Australian hip hop (which is detailed in the case study of Urthboy). ‘Thundamentals’ also evokes the slang phrase of being ‘mental’, suggesting that these are young men have a good time; that they are energetic, wild, or skilled performers. This suggests a tough but cheeky Australian masculinity. All of this is done within a name that becomes part of an identifiable brand and performs a taste statement. Further, ‘Thundamentals’ is not just a name of an act for an audience member to remember when thinking of attending a show, but is connected to a font, logo, merchandise and online presence. The overarching brand includes all of these: this thesis

investigates if political critique expressed musically by performers is in fact bound by the brand. That is, does the brand interrupt any political messages conveyed, and impact on the potential of audience members to take political action?

This current ubiquity of branding, even performed by small-scale and independent artists like Thundamentals, suggests an acceptance of the fact that

[m]any musicians, whether it be playing in local clubs or at major music festivals, are already a vital part of the elaborate structure of meaning within which brands are produced. They are part of what Adorno called the 'almighty totality' of capitalism and so cannot avoid validating its 'monolithic control' (Carah 70–1).

This contrasts with an earlier narrative of a popular music artist from the mid-1980s who was unhappy with having a video for a single professionally produced by a marketing department of a record company, even as the “sales of the record increased 650 percent the day after [the video] went on TV” (Negus *Producing Pop* 65).

The now familiar idea that a record company brands a musical act was revealed in 1992 by a senior company executive who talked about tying an “ethic of authenticity” associated with U2 and the images of singer Bono and a Joshua Tree from their *Joshua Tree* album (Negus *Producing Pop* 70-2). This branding was deemed to be “brilliant marketing” because it was consistent and recognisable, like a “trademark” (Negus *Producing Pop* 71-2). Negus showed foresight when commenting on the importance of a “concise image which operates as a metonym for an artist’s entire identity and music” as becoming more important as large vinyl designs declined and small images on compact discs, cassette covers and merchandise became a requirement (and now, of course, the proliferation of branded images in a digital online context) (Negus *Producing Pop* 72).

The self-promotion of individual MCs in the public sphere is not only, as Hearn says, “outer-directed” into a void, but into the “basin of immaterial labour”, where other “units” also perform intellectual, managerial, creative and entrepreneurial work in order to promote themselves (“Radical Eclectic” 317; Lazzarato 4). Immaterial labour is made up

of physical, mental and emotional (or affective) labour, and entails awareness of other units who are also managing themselves as businesses (Hardt and Negri 109).

Crafting a personal brand is managerial work that requires exploitation of “networks” of other workers in the “social factory”, and “flows” of information through these networks (Lazzarato 3-4). Immaterial labour is conducted by both audience members and performers within these networks, which are ‘worked’, or as Mauricio Lazzarato says, “exploit[ed]” in order to form the brands that display taste (3). Immaterial labour has been defined by Lazzarato as “involv[ing] a series of activities that are not normally recognized as ‘work’ ... the kinds of activities involved in defining and fixing cultural and artistic standards, fashions, tastes, consumer norms, and ... public opinion” (3). This managerial, self-reflexive labour is a defining characteristic of presenting a personal brand in a neoliberal era (Gershon 291).

Performing this immaterial labour has been seen as a requirement of producing a personal brand on digital media. This has been explored in relation to professional workers, for whom “digital media has come to be used as a professional tool in a managerial logic that is instrumentally pointed towards the curation of a professional image” (Gandini 127). Another study considered the way that job-seekers wrestled with the notion of producing a “corporate self” or personal brand online to help their chances of employment (Gershon). Like job-seekers and professional workers, MCs are also subject to this imperative to produce a personal brand. The toll of the labour required to do this becomes visible when an independent hip hop artist such as Indigenous Australian MC Jimblah posts that he needs to have a “digital detox”, or a break from performing his branded self online, and get back to making music (reference no longer available).

Much like a musician wanting a break from the process of self-branding, perhaps there is something in an individual’s identity that remains ineffable and unable to be

captured in a personal brand. Nevertheless, the sense of something intangible can *also* be found in personal brands, where it is the product of mental, physical, and emotional labour. It takes work—which can include data entry, graphic design, administration, online marketing, costume and make up styling—to establish the ineffable ‘feel’ of a personal brand as it is actively interpreted by others. Indeed, the very idea of ineffability is used to strategically promote personal brands. The ‘feel’ of a personal brand is not only a communicative or emotional essence: it is found in an abstract entity, a meta-narrative of self.

In fact, ‘feel’ can be used to rank and categorise individuals. For example, the idea of an allusive essence or “look” possessed by individual fashion models is in fact shown to be constructed by booking agencies, photographers, magazine editors and others in the fashion industry (Mears). Models’ own regulation of their bodies, emotions, and choices about whether to attend castings and accept jobs constitute entrepreneurial labour to promote a personal brand, to achieve the status of having an individual ‘look’ that is then traded and ranked by those in the industry (Mears). When looking at hip hop, a parallel can be drawn between the idea of a model’s “look” and the idea that an MC is naturally gifted at rapping, or that a female performer’s embodiment is ‘fierce’. These supposedly innate qualities are strategically invoked to reinforce their personal brand, which is competitively worked against those of others.

I use the term self-branding when studying MCs to stay attentive to relational presentations of a ‘self’, and also to the success of the *transaction of taste* between audience and artist that occurs at the site of the brand. This transaction may include a financial component, such as when music, merchandise or a show ticket are acquired. Yet, whether financial or not, the transaction of taste is a result of immaterial labour, and particularly affective labour, the “defining and fixing of cultural and artistic standards”,

which can be enacted by the artist, the promoters, and the audience (Lazzarato 3). This thesis is primarily concerned, then, with MCs' personal brands, which is the site where each of these parties interacts.

Kristin Lieb's study of the branding of female pop stars used Wendy Griswold's idea of a "cultural diamond" to give a schema of the interactions in which personal musician brands are situated (Griswold). The diamond has four points: social world, creator, receiver, and cultural object. Like the female pop stars that Lieb studies, hip hop artists can be understood as cultural objects (as also observed by Carah 65). However, this four-pointed map is in fact a representation of a complex, dynamic system of interactions and relationships. It is within this framework that personal brands of musicians are (co)created.

The interactions of taste that help to build brands occur in multiple locations. These range from the presence of an MC's performing body in an entertainment venue to their choice of costume in a photo shoot. Therefore, the 'fixing' of "cultural and artistic standards" could more accurately be seen as performing a playful, moving position in a spectrum of "fashions, tastes [and] "consumer norms", which are also in flux (Lazzarato 3).

Therefore, self-branding covers, but is more than, a group of products, or even representations of a life narrative. It goes further and describes the process whereby individuals (or those that work for them) pour "emotion, life energy, and personality" into the task of personal image management (Hearn "Reality Television" 69). In fact, Alison Hearn found that reality television performers model in their personal brands a self-conscious production of 'being' itself that exists in order to be consumed and categorized by others. This double consciousness is relational in the extreme. Managing selfhood, or subjectivity, in this way assumes that it will be consumed by others, and that this process is necessary for individual success.

In this sense the personal brand, like other kinds of brands, “no longer refers to a simple commodity but to an entire ‘virtual context’ for consumption; it stands for a specific way of using the object, a propertied form of life to be realized in consumption” (Arvidson 244). Realising life in consumption can in fact be extended beyond objects and applied to the notion that performers’ personal brands are products to be consumed. The actual ‘stuff’ of branding—the merchandise, images, tracks, and fragmented mentions of artist names both online and offline—is situated within a context where a Name itself, or a visible, overarching personal brand, is something to be attained. This has some connections to historical conceptions of selfhood, but is a particular product of the neoliberal era, which encourages the “self as reflexive manager” (Gershon 291).

Like reality television performers, MCs work at a “ground zero” for this self-reflexive promotion of subjectivity that is for the consumption of others (Hearn “Radical Eclectic” 66). Both groups of people use their bodies, voices, clothes, and mediated versions of themselves in order to claim a space in the public sphere. The roles of conscious MCs and reality show participants contrast, however, in the sense that the MCs are *meant* to highlight the inequalities of social systems, to have a liberated, politically critical voice, and possibly to have depth to their ‘content’, achieved through ‘talent’. MCs nevertheless also develop personal brands that vie for visibility in the “attention economy” (Davenport and Beck).

Hip hop performers are, in fact, particularly apt for the study of self-branding. This is demonstrated in the moments where hip hop and branding history meet. A prominent, early example of branding in hip hop is actually one of cross-branding, seen (and heard) in Run DMC’s 1986 track, “My Adidas” (Run DMC). The phenomenon of sneaker consumption by fans of the track is itself ‘sold’ in the music video, which is now available on YouTube (IHS7). The Adidas logo of three parallel white stripes on a black background

became associated with the bodies, faces, and rapping voices of Run DMC. More broadly, the logo suggested a youth movement connected by a love of hip hop and a clothing aesthetic, and the ability to buy and collect Adidas shoes as a status object. The 'Eureka moment' that led to Adidas seizing upon the already existing use of their products is described by Mellery-Pratt:

Angelo Anastasio, a senior Adidas employee, was attending a 1986 Madison Square Gardens performance of the Raising Hell tour when he was struck by the sight of tens of thousands of fans lifting their Adidas sneakers into the air, answering the call of those on stage. Inspired, Anastasio reportedly ran back to the Adidas New York headquarters and within days, Run-D.M.C. became the first hip hop group to receive a million-dollar endorsement deal (Mellery-Pratt).

That Run DMC's call to wave sneakers in the air was not yet capitalised upon seems incredible from the perspective of the current time of "convergence of content and commerce" (Taylor 405). Bringing together a cultural phenomenon, musical performers and consumer items is now widespread, but this was a landmark use of this combination. A later example of such a 'synergy' is that created between Nike and the Wu Tang Clan and street 'influencers' (to use the more recent marketing term) such as DJs to sell the group and their records (Negus *Music Genres* 99).

Here, the relationality implied in the brand of Run DMC, and all that constitutes it, such as their distinctive costumes, stance, performance and logotype, forms more than a metaphorical transaction of taste and allegiance with the audience: this transaction is also *literal* for those who 'bought in'. The elements of the brands of Run DMC and Adidas bounce off each other: the performers wore Adidas tracksuits and shoes, and the company produced Run DMC sneakers for the audience to buy in order to be 'living' the lyrics of the song. In this sense this is a kind of "piggyback advertising", in that the consumption of Run DMC's music and Adidas' shoes and clothes keep following each other (Martilla and Thompson 365). The immaterial labour of Run DMC and their management creates, to use Lazzarato's phrase, a "consumer norm" (3). Much as the

genre distinctions between the seemingly opposed conscious and gangsta are on examination made complex, the activity of doing, or somehow essentially 'being' hip hop in fact has a historical relationship with a commodity culture that makes use of brands.

Another example of this is the array of artists who promoted St. Ides liquor after Ice Cube's pioneering effort. Notorious B.I.G, Tupac Shakur, Ghetto Boyz, and The Wu-Tang Clan and others followed his lead and promoted the product, as well as including lyrics about the liquor in their tracks (Graham). One notable exception, however, was Public Enemy's Chuck D, whose song, "One Million Bottlebags", criticised St. Ides for unauthorised use of his voice in a commercial. He was also successful in suing them for this use (Graham). A university student writer also disapproved of the relationship between hip hop artists and branded products: "[t]he music industry glamorizes gangster rap while exploiting Hip-hop to make a profit, and change needs to happen fast" [sic] (Whaley).

However, a reporter on marketing trends honoured the innovation of cross-branding efforts by hip hop artists and companies, such as that of Adidas and Run DMC, which is given the status of being an "iconic" campaign (Sebastian). Attributing this iconic status to the commercial arrangement between artists and a clothing label is a material version of honouring the foundational narrative of hip hop.

The cross-branding of Run DMC and Adidas goes further than corporate sponsorship arrangements with athletes or, to use the more recent term, their 'brand ambassadors'. Here, a brand of commodity items is enmeshed with music, evoking the idea that those people identifying with hip hop are somehow a part of a youth movement, which gives a sense of belonging. The 'iconic' status is referenced in the use of Run DMC 'vintage' t-shirts in contemporary fashion and by making jokes on the logotype, such as the t-shirt design which reads "Run THC", which refers to the active ingredient in marijuana (DVNT). The blocked font of the Run DMC logotype is also used by other artists such as

Yasiin Bey and the drummer, Questlove, from The Roots in their merchandise, which suggests a similar 'old-school' status to these artists, while also paying homage to Run DMC (Acclaim and Soulfest; hhv.de; Okayplayer).

The pioneering and much-referenced arrangement between Run DMC and Adidas is now a central part of the commercial music business. This is driven by the decline in revenue from music sales, which peaked "in 1999 at approximately 14.5 billion dollars. By 2012 that amount had shrunk to only approximately \$7 billion—a decline of more than 50% not accounting for inflation" (Gordon). A former lifestyle and marketing manager for the sportswear brand Puma reported that, currently

artists can make money from sponsorship deals in numerous ways, from wearing the brand for a certain length of time, to appearing at brand-sponsored events, to licensing their songs for use in Puma commercials, to lending their style, inspiration, and name to product lines (Lieb 64).

Cross-branding arrangements between music and clothing companies that make use of hip hop act's brands were mimicked when music management tried to cut out the crossing of brands with the apparel companies and instead make their own merchandise. A key example of this is Wu Tang Clan's formation of their own line of "Wu Wear" (Negus *Music Genres* 101).

Branching out beyond apparel, corporate brands now provide a "tactile", "bear hug" branding experience for music fans at music festivals, where they sponsor various venues and provide drinks; "[y]oung people's enjoyment of the music festival built brand equity for global corporations. Music fans play a vital role in bringing corporate brands to life" (Carah 3). Such "experiential branding" can take the form of whole festivals and competitions being mounted by corporate brands (Carah).

The enmeshment of musicians and corporate brands has resulted in complex deals that blur the previous formats of a television advertisement or a standalone music video.

Hybrid products that push a corporate brand and an artist, with new economic arrangements behind the scenes, are detailed in the examples of Sting promoting a new song's music video as a Jaguar advertisement, and Gwen Stefani, her music and members of her band featuring in a Hewlett-Packard commercial, where she is dressed in the same outfit as the music video, with the same director employed on both (Taylor 409, 413).

Cross-branding arrangements have also come to be mimicked in the display of branded clothes by individual consumers—who are *not* being paid for it. Examples of this include bloggers who model their purchases ('hauls') of the distinct range of clothing that has developed since the time of "My Adidas", called "luxury streetwear" (annadotsyak; underratedco). This example underscores the finding that social media has encouraged "consumer-to-consumer driven information that creates personal branding", where the personal brands of the bloggers makes use of those of the clothing manufacturers (Chen 332).

These devotional streetwear blogs are an example of how cross-branding efforts such as that by Run DMC and Adidas and the Wu Tang Clan and Nike are no longer limited to the domain of major players. In the current era, the idea of promoting a personal brand and aligning it with that of others is no longer a breakthrough. Curating a personal brand is now achieved for the benefit of potential romantic or sexual partners (Tinder) or employers on LinkedIn (Gershon), the latter being a practice that is encouraged by university career advisors (Merdin). For some young people who have access to online technologies and work and play in arenas that encourage an entrepreneurial projection of Brand You, self-branding is ubiquitous, as seen in a Mr. Men character re-imagined for 'millenials' (Figure 11) (Knoblauch).

MR. PERSONAL BRAND

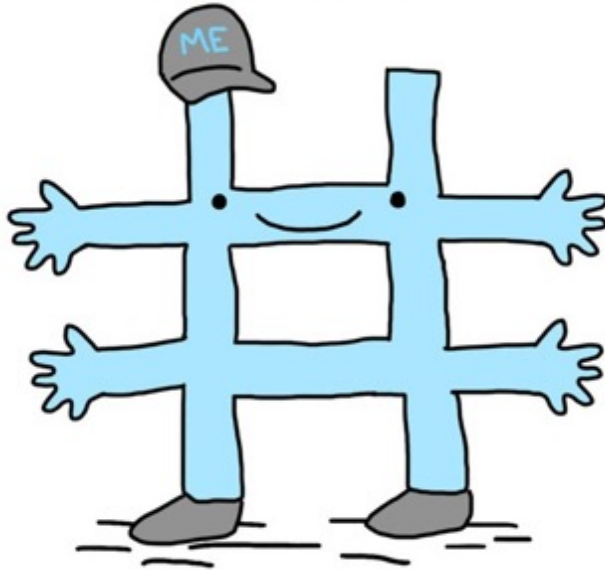


FIGURE 11. MR PERSONAL BRAND (KNOBLAUGH).

Mr Personal Brand comes complete with merchandise emblazoned with 'Me', which references the colour of his hashtag body. Like "Mr. Tumblr book deal" from the same online post, "Mr Personal Brand" plays on the expectation that self-branding in material, embodied and hashtag form are, in fact, stock pathways available to some young people born around the turn of the millennium (particularly those with access to online media) (Knoblauch). This engenders a database mentality towards the 'self', that is, an awareness that others may search and find 'you' using hashtags (Page), usernames, keywords and categories. This feature of a neoliberal era is now a naturalised (although not easy or straightforward) conception of projecting a 'self', "as though [it] is a business" (Gershon 288). This has been described in a study of members of a straight edge subculture;

"[y]oung people in late modernity exercise a high level of reflexive surveillance over themselves and their lives. They reflect on themselves, adjust and cast surveillance again in a reflexive loop of continual feedback on the self" (Nolan and Threadgold 81).

The ubiquity of this reflexive loop suggests that hip hop participants anticipated and continued the act of self-branding as a part of widespread, ongoing immaterial labour. This is now conducted by people in diverse areas, from those who post porn on Tumblr (Lady Cheeky) to academics sharing their opinions on Twitter (Bowles). Home cooking (Soong), personal life (Anna Spargo-Ryan), and political causes (Moss) all make use of personal brands.

A telling example of this is seen in internet users who post make up and hair tutorials on YouTube, Facebook, Tumblr, Instagram, and other online platforms, and fix their brand to a username such as “Taren916” (Taren916). By using elements of their ‘selves’, such as their hair, body, face, interaction with a camera, and online comments, they distribute their personal brand (makeupbydrini). The people ‘behind’ these brands may be amateur or professional, or move between the two. Some take sharing their passion for grooming tips (or, indeed, in the case of Mr Tumblr Book Deal from the millennial cartoon, pugs) offline to events, seminars, and into print publishing. Some may also move from being an unpaid blogger about their topic of passion (such as parenting and ‘D.I.Y’ solutions for mothers) to hosting advertising for, or being sponsored by, relevant companies (mamamia; wellnessmama.com).

The prominent example of cross-branding by Run DMC and Adidas is now echoed by individuals who enter into arrangements with organisations, such as when a fisherman is sponsored by an equipment outlet, or a yoga teacher recommends an athletic clothes company (Charlie Moore the Mad Fisherman; Manduka). There is now a proliferation of individuals performing this immaterial labour of self-branding: there is an ocean of ‘natural’ hair bloggers and vloggers and an array of sponsored yoga teachers. Yet, a commonality to these diverse examples is the use of the individual life narrative as the overarching ‘house’ for the brand. In this sense, early hip hop’s promotion of a personal brand that

does public, promotional work, requiring constant entrepreneurial management, has anticipated a significant cultural trend.

The current era of online communication, dubbed 'Web 2.0', has visibly translated into consumers being called on to be more interactive with brands and represent their taste statement to others. The contemporary MC therefore negotiates an environment in which a relational promotion of a 'self', and that self's taste, is not only an activity for recording artists. This situation has been summarised by Kristin Lieb:

As the *Cultural Diamond* suggests, society and popular culture are mutually reinforcing. As celebrities blur the line between the personal and the professional for attention, audiences themselves are blurring the lines between their personal and public selves via social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter. At the same time, the lines between the content side of the entertainment business and the business side of the business (e.g., marketing and advertising) are collapsing, destroying the once-critical notion of artistic purity (37, italics in original).

Some listeners of Run DMC's track in the 1980s bought Adidas shoes and waved them in the crowd at shows, in fact, Darryl 'D.M.C' Daniels has reminisced that

[w]e was [sic] going through Detroit, through Boston, through Chicago, through LA, through Virginia; every city we went to on the Raising Hell Tour [in 1985–1986], we would look out the back of the tour bus and everybody had the Adidas [track] suits from head to toe (Mellery–Pratt).

However, these fans weren't also Tweeting, Facebooking, posting, and sharing about their behaviour, that is, they weren't themselves interacting as personal brands with Run DMC and Adidas' brands. Individuals may now select from an array of cultural and promotional material in order to perform these personal brands. Now, the layers of consumer/hip hop knowledge available to select from include: the original sneaker line (Mellery-Pratt); the 'landmark' status given to the hip hop track; the rise, fall and return of Run DMC; the sneaker lines that pay tribute to the original; the reunion of Adidas and Run DMC in 2013 for a music video (Sebastian); and the subsequent move for one of the members of Run DMC to be associated with competing apparel brand Le Coq Sportif (Billboard).

In this complex environment that includes, in the terms of the cultural diamond, active consumers or 'receivers', a brand is not a sealed entity. Brands are vulnerable to being 'brandalised'. Brandalism has multiple meanings, which illustrate differences in power of the parties involved.

Firstly, brandalism can be defined as an undesirable connection between a brand and a consumer, such as so-called 'chavs' taking on, and for some, taking over, the brand association of designer clothing labels such as Burberry (Bok 54). A telling example of this kind of 'brandalism' was seen in the flashing of designer sneakers, sunglasses, and champagne labels by "corporate hip hop" stars such as Diddy, 50Cent or Jay Z (Hayward and Yar 23). In this sense of the term, 'chavs' do not possess the social and financial status of Burberry, an international corporation whose branded 'lifestyle of leisure' is meant to be something to aspire to by buying their clothes and bags. However, the aspiration, it seems, is not targeted at chavs, even if they reclaim and re-use the branded clothes and bags (and cheap imitations thereof). This cycle between media depictions of luxury consumption, their uptake by 'undesirables' judged as too flashy in their consumption practices, and the attempts to restrict this association between consumers and brands, has been studied in the phenomenon of policing 'chavs' and other young people's clothing items, such as 'hoodies' (hooded sweatshirts) (Kubrin; Miller). This practice of co-opting fashion targeted above the socio-economic means of a subcultural group has precursors in the style of, for example, 1950s Teddy Boys who committed "'theft' of an upper-class style", and Mods, who "push[ed]" middle-class "neatness to the point of absurdity" (Hebdige 83, 52).

Secondly, brandalism can refer to the application of branding in unauthorised spaces, such as stencils and stickers of the skateboard clothing company Ecko and the artworks of street artist Banksy, 'vandalising' advertising found in public places (Hayward

and Yar 22-3). Ecko may benefit from this kind of ‘brandalism’ (and may in fact encourage it), as their ideal consumer sees themselves as rebellious. Banksy’s success as the most identifiable street artist may now in fact work against his stated culture-jamming intentions of painting over billboards (Sanford Smith).

Thirdly, brandalism can mean the dilution or intervention in a brand due to an ill-planned cross-branding effort. This third meaning is not the “incorporation” in the sense of safety pins and PVC showing up in fashion shows in response to the “spectacular” subcultural style of punks as detailed by Dick Hebdige (96). Rather, it includes a personal brand being used in association with that of a corporate or political body, and one or both of these suffering damage to the public perception of their brand as a result. An example of this definition is studied in Chapter 5, which details K’naan’s association with the FIFA World Cup and Coca-Cola. This addresses the need for scholars to consider the challenge of personal brands interacting with corporate ones, pointed out by Gershon (289).

The brands of organisations and businesses interact with each other; as do the brands of organisations (such as FIFA) and people (such as K’naan); and individuals interact with each others’ personal brands also. The latter includes individual MCs interacting with, and selecting, each other’s personal brands. For example, African-Australian female MC Muma Doesa re-posts a track by Jimblah, an indigenous Australian MC, on the online streaming service, Soundcloud (Soundcloud). Doesa also posts on Facebook, questioning who is included in the term ‘Australian hip hop’, and promotes other ‘brown’ artists in Australia. The content of her posts, but also the choices of inclusions and exclusion of those she networks with and whose tracks she curates, suggests a political response to the category of ‘Australian hip hop’ (Caribbean Cookout). As seen in this example, immaterial labour includes “knowledge” or “symbolic” work, both

by Doesa, and by those in her social networks as they interpret her ‘sharing’ inclusions and exclusions (Hearn “Radical Eclectic” 316).

In this sense contemporary self-branding for MCs goes beyond the promotional material that performers have used in previous eras. Now, MCs work and play at the ‘rap game’ within a context that sees many spheres of work marked by precarity and intense competition for attention, and the hope of monetary profits or employment that attention may command. An MC today must think about their audience’s interactivity with their brand; they may, for example, be aware of all of the other many hip hop names that use ‘lady’ or ‘boy’, and so strive to find their so-called ‘point of difference’. Even if they reject the marketing language of ‘being a brand’, or the idea of selling themselves, the phenomenon is the same. For example, Urthboy posted on Facebook—possibly due to my social media connections with him and that the title of my thesis is visible to him—that he is “not a brand” (reference no longer available). This is a neat summary of the conundrum: even as an MC may insist on their human agency, creativity, and may reject capitalist norms, their performances, recordings, and their very ‘social life’ both online and offline is embedded in the networks that jostle personal brands (including mine, as a scholar) alongside each other like, as Urthboy wrote, “cans of pineapple” (reference no longer available).

As advanced capitalist modes of work have pressured individuals to be “innovative and flexible”, so the project of forming a brand *of oneself* seems necessary to navigate these demands (Hearn “Meat, Mask, Burden” 199). The pressure to sell “The Brand That Is You” moved from its beginnings at marketing and business literature and events to its present pervasive state (Marwick 164-6; Peters). Hip hop itself emerged in an economic environment that was marked by a decline in manufacturing jobs and a rise in low-paid service jobs, which are some of the features of a “post-Fordist” era (Hearn “Meat, Mask,

Burden" 199). This is the context in which the hip hop practice of big-noting oneself emerged. As already detailed, this self-promotion in hip hop has also been linked to gang culture, the challenge of physically and economically surviving as a Black male in a ghetto, and as offering a means of claiming social status otherwise denied to participants (Collins). In these ways, branding oneself as an MC—that is, the combination of one's rapping skills, flow, an overarching character, geographic and cultural origins, social 'crew', and life narrative—can also be seen as a means for marginalised people to develop pride and self-esteem.

Such meaning-making is still open to individuals. However, having pride in your hip hop 'self' may also extend to include physical objects that can be purchased, stolen, traded, or appropriated, such as the musical media itself: the LP, tape, or CD. MCs' personal branding also includes artist photos, videos, and tracks online, on television, the radio, and in newspapers and magazines. Each of these items may then be shared and referenced in a chain of online interactions. Many of these instances of self-branding do not result in a profit for individual artists. Yet, they are a part of the logic of branding a self that can be consumed by audience, fans, and listeners. This is an entrepreneurial use of the MC role.

Due to the decline of profitability of recordings and the uptake of various music downloading, sharing, and streaming technologies, branded, concrete objects are now more commonly merchandise, mostly clothes (Andersen and Frenz; Oullet). A selection of these concrete objects and the way that consuming them can be seen as a way to 'buy in' to a personal brand are studied in this thesis.

This includes branded t-shirts, women's tops, and hoodies, and a variety of smaller items, from 'stubbie' holders (for beer) to tea towels and stickers to a (Urthboy "Finally Revealed"). Some of these items bring the self-branding of conscious artists into domestic

or personal spaces, which shall be examined in the case of an Urthboy stubbie holder and a Ladi6 tea towel. This highlights the ubiquity and proliferation of self-branding, and may suggest novel uses of political messages. This question will be interrogated in the case study chapters.

These instances of branding reflect the broader social imperative to flexibly manage one's own human capital in a highly self-conscious way. At the moment, this management is embedded within processes of capitalist "transaction and exchange" (Hearn "Meat, Mask, Burden" 198). This thesis investigates how three artists negotiate the tension of performing the role of being a conscious MC—that is, being apparently politically critical, and by implication, seeking changes to the dominant political system of advanced capitalism—whilst being incorporated into this system of personal brand transaction.

Chapter 3: “Come on Lady!”

This chapter outlines the arrival of hip hop in Aotearoa-New Zealand and discusses the mythology that Pacific Islanders possess a 'natural' ownership of the genre. The significance of Ladi6's career as a female MC and singer emerges when viewed in the context of Aotearoa-New Zealand hip hop, as she challenges the stereotype that hip hop 'belongs' to Māori and Pacific Islander male MCs.

In particular, her play with the role of 'lady' can be seen as a strategic claiming of female space in the public domain and music industry, which I term 'ladyspace'. This term is used to describe Ladi6's branding as a process of carving out a new space for women. The components studied as a part of her creation of ladyspace include her tracks, lyrics, videos, costuming, cover art and live performance. This overarching personal brand also includes concrete objects such as a tea-towel and sticker.

The mix of elements that both honour Pacific Islander cultural practices and present an optimistic spiritual message, is a self-reflexive use of conscious hip hop genre resources in combination with local cultural material. These elements, together with Ladi6's lyrics, provide messages of personal and cultural encouragement. This is congruent with the effort by many Samoans to be 'positive role models' and to be proud of their heritage, yet Ladi6 also departs from the orthodox script of 'The Samoan Way' being founded on a Christian God, by invoking a feminine divinity in the tracks “Oneness” and “Sylphlike”. I explore how her creation of a 'ladyspace' and message of transcendent oneness are advanced through the process of self-branding.

It Came Naturally

Hip hop arrived in Aotearoa-New Zealand in two main forms. The first was via brief performances by Black and Latino breakers on imported Michael Jackson film clips on MTV and American feature films such as *Flashdance*, *Beat Street* and *Fame* (Henderson 192; Khmer qtd Hager "The Next Resource"; Zemke-White "Rap Music" 2). Although little more than glimpses, these sequences were the seed of what became a very popular creative medium and vehicle of identification for, in particular, Māori and Pacific Islander youth.

The second method of arrival was via hip hop dance such as breaking, popping and locking, brought by Samoans who moved between American cities such as Los Angeles and New York, Pacific Islands such as Samoa, and Aotearoa-New Zealand (Henderson). Aotearoa-New Zealand hip hop artists who went on to be known for their MCing and production work, such as Māori MC, Te Kupu²⁷, had previous incarnations as breakers in the early 1980s.

Samoan breakers such as Kosmo and Suga Pop were participants in United States hip hop in the late 1970s and early 1980s, with Suga Pop in particular playing a "prominent role in the [United States] bicoastal cross-fertilisation of popular dance" (Henderson 182). Their direct, embodied sharing of hip hop dance in Aotearoa-New Zealand was a physical, first-person link to the forefront of hip hop culture in the United States.

Initially it was mostly Pacific Islander and Māori youth who responded enthusiastically to this initial exposure to hip hop and Aotearoa-New Zealand hip hop has become known as a form that culturally represents the lives of Māori and Pacific Islander

²⁷ Also known as D-Word and Dean Hapeta.

youth (Mitchell "Doin' Damage" 12-3). This is because, consistently since their initial participation in the early 1980s, Aotearoa-New Zealand hip hop participants (particularly recording artists) have been overwhelmingly of Māori and/or Pacific Islander descent.

Hip hop artists and academic commentators have speculated that this is due to a recognition of shared physical 'otherness', based mostly on skin colour, between the Māori and Pacific Islander youth and the Black and Latino breakers they glimpsed briefly on media imports, or experienced through the anecdotes and dances of their relatives (Henderson; Kopytko; Mitchell "Kia Kaha!"). This recognition is a theme repeated in many locations worldwide, such as the description of "[a] new generation of Palestinian and Arab American youth [who] have grown up identifying with the experiences of racism shared with other youth of color in the United States" (Maira 166). The characterisation of early hip hop participants in Aotearoa-New Zealand in this way frames their involvement in hip hop as a political act, one where they were able to embody a sense of solidarity with other marginalised people from another continent (Henderson; Kopytko 26; Mitchell "Kia Kaha!" 283-5).

The context of this initial perception of likeness—or shared Otherness—was that of early 1980s Aotearoa-New Zealand media programming, where "domestic programs featuring Māori and Pacific Islanders [were] virtually non-existent" (Henderson 192). The extent of the lack in media representation for Māori and Pacific Islanders was such that "[a] Polynesian kid watching television in [New Zealand] can be excused for thinking he or she doesn't exist" (Scott 54 qtd Henderson 192). Similarly, much of the music available on commercial stations did not represent Māori and Pacific Islanders (Mitchell "Kia Kaha").

As well as broad physical similarities (in addition to skin colour, hair and eye types), a recognition of the abilities displayed by the breakers and many Māori and Pacific Islander young people's own strengths in the fields of dance and music in particular has

been used to explain their enthusiastic take-up of hip hop as an art form and as a cultural identifier (Hapeta *Hip Hop*, Henderson; Kopytko; Mitchell "Kia Kaha!"; Shute; Wood; Zemke-White "How Many Dudes").

The idea that some groups of people have an aptitude for hip hop—and some do not—is deployed in comic form in the Aotearoa-New Zealand film *Sione's Wedding* (Graham). A White New Zealand hip hop fan is the butt of the joke as he tries, too hard and unsuccessfully, to mimic his Samoan workmate's hip hop moves, clothes, and Samoan brotherly greetings—the implication being that these are natural to the Samoans but are ill-suited to the White man (Graham). It further implies that 'Samoan-ness' is as 'natural' as 'hip hop-ness'. Claiming ownership of a cultural practice, even when performed for the sake of a joke, such as in *Sione's Wedding*, is a political act. Equating Pacific Islander with being a 'natural' at hip hop is a strategic political stance, even if expressed with humour (and in this case, the humour is at the expense of the White man). As Henderson observes, participation in hip hop was a political act:

'Bop' – American street dance forms such as popping, locking, and breaking – created a space of solace and comfort where Māori and Pacific Islander young people could seemingly fashion their own codes and conditions for acceptance and exercise a limited form of power (193).

An explanation of hip hop becoming a site for the cultural and political expression for Māori and Pacific Islanders is that it is connected to other activities where rhythm, dancing and singing dominate, such as gospel singing, *fia fia*, and reggae (Hapeta *Hip Hop*). Hip hop is a vehicle that, unlike singing in church, provides the means to express more of the realities of young, urban lives, much as has been suggested with the African-American hip hop generation (Rose *Black Noise* 20). Explaining the 'fit' of hip hop with other cultural activities for Māori and Pacific Islanders has some correlation with the ways that hip hop has been historicised as having precursors in African and African-American culture (Gaunt; Potter; Stapleton). Just as Paul Gilroy argued that black music offered a

place for "testing out and deploying the forms of subjectivity which are required by political agency" so hip hop offered marginalized groups in Aotearoa-New Zealand a means for young people to shape and express their identity (*The Black Atlantic* 36). This was particularly true for Pacific Islanders:

Although Pacific Islander engagement in hip hop developed on the back of Māori rap, the emergence of this movement was in many ways symptomatic of the development of a more youth-oriented culture by the second or third generation descendants of Pacific Island migrants (Colchester 170–1).

This "youth-oriented culture" grew in reaction to the "claustrophobic self-contained church communities" of Pacific Islanders in Aotearoa-New Zealand (Colchester 171). These outward-looking hip hop participants inspired by African-American hip hop have been characterised as reacting to the constant gaze to the home of respective Pacific Islands (Colchester 170-1). This suggests that "hip hop is there for the[m]", that they are global members of the "hip hop generation" that DJ Kool Herc invoked (DJ Kool Herc 12). Allegiance, meaning-making, and political critique occur through being identified as Aotearoa-New Zealand members of a global hip hop generation.

Hip hop has been characterised as a distinctively 'urban' cultural form, that is, a product of late-twentieth century technology, racial and economic oppression, and inner-city density (Rose "Soul Sonic Forces"). Similarly, poor, predominantly Pacific Islander areas of the capital city, Auckland, have been named as a birthplace of hip hop activity in Aotearoa-New Zealand (Colchester 170). This also mirrors hip hop's uptake by Indigenous boys in inner-city Sydney described by Mitchell ("The New Corroboree" 21). The initial participation in hip hop by Pacific Islanders in urban South Auckland in the early 1980s is likewise suggested to be an echo of African-Americans finding expression for their political and economic grievances through the medium of hip hop in the New York ghettos in the 1970s (Flaws 1; Saw 8).

These urban areas nurtured the growth of hip hop, which is another point of cross-continental recognition for its participants. This recognition has an imaginary element, heard in the album name, "Southside" (Dawn Raid Entertainment) and explained by both Tony Mitchell ("Kia Kaha!" 283) and Chloe Colchester:

Like churches, hip hop is a cultural form that means that Western Samoans can feel at home in an imagined landscape that is both here and elsewhere at the same time; only partially anchored in Auckland. As if to emphasize its in-betweenness, South Auckland has been renamed 'Southside' as migrants from Western Samoa match their urban experiences to the experiences and struggles of American Samoan expatriates living in Southside Los Angeles (172).

Imaginatively being "elsewhere" works against the perception of Aotearoa-New Zealand being culturally and geographically marginal and disconnected from so-called world centres. This is another example of participation in hip hop being a political activity and a form of sense-making for participants.

Participation in hip hop in Aotearoa-New Zealand has another explicitly political dimension. The form developed in Aotearoa-New Zealand at a time of sustained activism for Māori land rights, and a desire to express Māori identity through popular forms. This is a part of what Tony Mitchell has termed "a cultural project of self-assertion and self-preservation which is linked with a global diaspora of musical expressions of indigenous ethnic minorities' social struggles" ("Doin' Damage" 50).

This "self-assertion and self-preservation" is found in the work Māori artists, such as Te Kupu. His lyrics, album titles and images invoke a range of leaders from Malcolm X to Māori warriors (Hapeta *E Tu*; Hapeta *Hip Hop*). The influence of Black Power rhetoric in American, Pacific, and Aotearoa-New Zealand hip hop has also been noted by April K. Henderson and made explicit in Te Kupu's documentary project to find the links between figures in these 'movements', entitled *Ngatahi: Know the Links* (Henderson 184; Kia Kaha Productions).

As an activist, university graduate, independent artist, producer, and self-appointed spokesman for Maori issues, Te Kupu has claimed hip hop as a vehicle for Maori political expression. His take on hip hop's impact in Aotearoa-New Zealand and the promotion of his group, Upper Hutt Posse²⁸, is overtly political (La Bute). His marriage of public activism and hip hop practice takes the idea of being a conscious MC and adds the role of activist, with the two reinforcing each other. Te Kupu's leveraging of these roles in his public life points to the way that being a 'political hip hop artist' is not only about representing, as Marley Marl emphasised, your "people": it also has implications for self-promotion (Spady, Lee, and Alim 27). Thus, the practice of hip hop in Aotearoa-New Zealand has been described as about both community and "individualism—about the reflection of our own South Pacific culture" (Saw et al 7). Te Kupu is an example of an MC 'consciously' representing a community, in an era, and an industry, where the pressure to self-brand is present.

The scale of the communities spoken for in Pacific and Aotearoa-New Zealand hip hop varies from the local to the national, from the regional to the global. For example, Scribe contributes to a Ladi6 track, saying, "This is Christchurch city come on" (Ladi6 "Call You Out"). Rapping about pride in an Aotearoa-New Zealand hip hop scene is heard in tracks such as "N.Z.H.I.P.H.O.P" and in the exhortation to keep "Aotearoa hip hop" strong (Nesian Mystik "N.Z.H.I.P.H.O. P, "Nesian Style"). For some Pacific Islander artists, 'shouting out' to community means addressing their raps to the wider Pacific region, such as when Samoan MC King Kapisi states that he "represent[s] for all Pacific peoples from Hawaii to Aotearoa" (King Kapisi). These are examples of hip hop artists from outside the United States 'representing' a community as they MC, similar to the idea of being a "nation conscious" artist who 'stands for', and raps to, a specific group of people (Eure and Spady;

²⁸ Also known as UHP.

Keyes *Rap Music*). This representation is a form of political critique as it makes space for marginalised identities.

When hip hop artists such as Nesian Mystik and King Kapisi respond to "the imperative to create something that pushes local boundaries and distinguishes oneself from both local and global Hip Hop styles" (Alim "Translocal Style" 113) they use various means to differentiate the collective identity of Samoans. For example, King Kapisi emphasised the need to be distinguished from "Africans" or "Americans" in his lyrics:

I see thru your brainwashing fever
I'm not from Africa or America, I'm from the islands of Samoa (King Kapisi)

Distinguishing themselves as Māori and/or Pacific Islander has taken the form of musical inclusions of Maori *waiata*²⁹ and Polynesian log drumming in hip hop tracks (Che Fu 2 *b.Spacific*). Wearing *pounamu*³⁰, Māori and/or Pacific Islander designed clothes onstage also distinguishes local identity from African-American forms of hip hop (Colchester 184; Hager "Globalisation"; Henderson), as does the use of stage names that display indigenous identity, such as Dam Native.

Che Fu's 1994 debut album heralded the commercial beginning of this trend of naming in Aotearoa-New Zealand hip hop, as it was titled 2 *b.Spacific*. Che Fu, King Kapisi, Te Kupu and Brotha D, have all been named the 'Godfather' of Pacific and/or Aotearoa-New Zealand hip hop (they trace Maori-Niuean, Samoan, Maori and Samoan heritage respectively). Claims of godfatherhood have been built, and debated, in their lyrics, CD booklets, their onstage performances, in print media, and on fan sites (Kinetik; King Kapisi "King Kapisi Official Site"; Lumiere; Urban Pacifica Records). This is a variation on men being given godfather status in the hip hop "creation narrative", such as DJ Kool Herc and Afrika Bambaataa, and the idea of even earlier godfathers, such as Gil

²⁹ Ceremonial song.

³⁰ Culturally and personally significant Māori greenstone pendants.

Scott Heron (LaBennett; Moody "Gil Scott Heron"). This Aotearoa-New Zealand version of the narrative establishes a distinct chapter of the story to that placed in the Bronx, yet echoes it as it repeats the practice of keeping male figures central and giving them an untouchable status.

The first commercially successful (although not the very first) Aotearoa-New Zealand hip hop track by MC and singer, Che Fu, was an overtly political comment against the nuclear testing at Mururoa Atoll. The single, "Chains", debuted at number one on the New Zealand Singles charts in 1996, and stayed there for five consecutive weeks. Fu's former label, Sony BMG, emphasised that "'Chains' reached Platinum sales and was the landmark single that brought NZ Hip Hop to mass attention" (SONY BMG). Che Fu has also won many Aotearoa-New Zealand music awards, reflecting the status his musical innovation and political lyrics have gained within the Aotearoa-New Zealand music industry (SONY BMG). Being signed to a major label for eight years helped Fu's prominence in the Aotearoa-New Zealand context³¹.

In particular, Fu has been credited with making popular a mixed, or "crossover" style of hip hop which draws on the popularity of reggae for many Maori and Pacific Islanders (Kara 4). Reggae and soul influences in particular have come to be perceived as key aspects of the Aotearoa-New Zealand or Pacific hip hop style (Kara 4). An example of this is heard when the band Kora say in an interview that the reason reggae is so intrinsic to much Aotearoa-New Zealand music is the geographic similarity between Jamaica and Aotearoa-New Zealand;

[a]lmost everyone in NZ has a reggae thing going on, I don't know if it's that we're a small island and Jamaica's a small island or what... but there's a heavy reggae influence (K. Davis).

Similarly, Te Kupu writes of

³¹ He chose to leave Sony-NZ in 2012 (Dubdotdash).

the influential influx of Afro-American hip hop that was perhaps the first musical-cultural force that offered a challenge to the immense strength of reggae, which had such a cultural resonance to all Polynesia. Reggae told stories of struggle and its beats seemed as natural to us as the waves rolling upon the beach (Te Kupu).

Te Kupu goes on to say "[h]owever hip hop offered something else, it gave a language bursting with rebellion, the process was one of an accumulated narrative of protest" (Te Kupu).

This "narrative of protest" through hip hop was established in Aotearoa-New Zealand when Ladi6 became a professional performer. Artists such as Che Fu, Te Kupu and King Kapisi had released their breakthrough albums and toured. The initial work of breaking the genre into the mainstream had happened, as had the first waves of 'cultural warfare' in representing Maori and/or Pacific Islander identities in hip hop. These central figures rapping lyrics with political messages are all male, and their gender is emphasised in the status as godfathers. In this sense, from the outset, the building of her personal brand and performance skills was one of expressing both ethnic likeness to those who claimed the genre in Aotearoa-New Zealand, and difference to them, due to her gender.

Making Ladyspace

Born Karoline Tamati, Ladi6 grew up in Christchurch, and has been professionally based in both Christchurch and Auckland. Her stage name suggests important themes for considering the political critique expressed through her personal brand.

Firstly, the use of numerals in a performance name is a hip hop tradition, with examples including the names KRS One, Royce Da 5"9, 50Cent, Deltron 3030, or that of the early graffiti writer, "Taki 183" (Kelley xi). Ladi6's stage name forms part of her personal brand, and uses the hip hop convention of gendered names such as 'boy' and 'lady'. The mark of this name is then rendered in various fonts and included in designs

that brand artist images and products, as will be discussed in the *Time is Not Much* cover art to follow (Figure 13). Choosing, and maintaining, a performance name is a creative process. Yet, it is also a central part of the imperative to present a "supposed[ly] stab[le] ... brand" (Gershon 289).

The use of 'Ladi' in her hip hop moniker also makes her gender performance immediately visible and can be read in many ways. It repeats the African-American practice, carried on in hip hop, of giving oneself honorific, gendered titles such as Duke Ellington or other figures from 'jazz royalty', such as Lady Day. This has continued in hip hop with the use of, for example, queen (Queen Latifah), sista/sister (Sista Souljah, Sista She), son (Native Son), or bro/brotha/brother (Brother Ali). These titles play on inflating the status of the performer, or else equalising them as 'just a brother'. 'Lady' can be a reclamation of feminine status by African-American women who have been denigrated, seen in the name of the early female crew, the Mercedes Ladies (Sher; Shomari 9-10). Lady is also evocative of African American Vernacular phrases such as 'All the ladies in the house shake your booty', or dance for men's voyeuristic pleasure, or the phrase heard upon the arrival of women deemed attractive, 'He-llo ladies!' Using lady can equally be a way to a claim to upper class status or to honour those who are *not* characterised as middle-class or respectable, such as when Alicia Keys sings of New York sex workers on the street, "the ladies work so hard" (Alicia Keys).

The intentional misspelling of 'lady' can be read as a declaration of allegiance with original African American hip hop culture. This is one of many examples seen around the world where "Black American Hip Hop Nation Language Varieties are remixed ... as evidenced in global Hip Hop naming practices" (Alim "Translocal Style Communities" 116; Perullo and Fenn 23-4). The name is a way of claiming authenticity within hip hop by

connecting to other women who present an overtly female role, such as Queen Latifah (Roberts).

Ladi6's name is also connected to wider discussions about the roles of women in hip hop, and the political impact that these might have on their listeners. This topic has been explored by African-American hip hop artist Lupe Fiasco, who suggested a progression between female roles in his track "Bitch Bad", where the refrain from the chorus is "bitch bad, woman good, lady better" (Lupe Fiasco). In the music video, young Black girls watch hip hop music videos and grow up to mimic the sexual movements they see there, becoming 'bitches'. While this is a routine observation, Fiasco's video generated controversy, and in the ensuing 'Twitter storm' he claimed that, due to this, he was quitting hip hop (Makarechi). The polemic of his single kept the spectrum of roles that range from 'bitch' to 'lady' intact, without complicating these categories, or questioning whether such a thing as a 'bitch' or a 'lady' really exists. 'Lady' is figured as the respectable, preferred role³² in Fiasco's track, and suggests a female variation on the qualities attributed to conscious MCs in Figure 10.

In this sense, the use of 'lady' in Ladi6's name presents her as a female conscious artist in a genre claimed to 'come naturally' to Māori and Pacific Islander men in Aotearoa-New Zealand. This suggests that her brand contains political critique in the very act of presenting a female name in a male dominated sphere. In addition, by using a female take on the 'conscious' MC role, Ladi6 enacts Hunter's suggestion to increase the amount of "conscious rap" included within commercial hip hop, which could have positive effects on women, as "conscious rap ... [is] an important source of pride, creativity, intellectual debate, and positivity" (31).

³² Although, one reviewer of Fiasco's video asked, "what woman wants to be called a lady?" Clearly, Ladi6 does (Soderberg).

Fiasco's repetition (or "mansplaining") of the stereotypes of women in hip hop can be placed alongside Lieb's life cycle model for female pop stars (Soderberg). Lieb's model has a similar progression from "good girl" at one end, with "temptress" starting a slippery slope into "whore", "exotic", "provocateur" or "hot mess" at the other (78). Ladi6's name shows that she is not a 'girl', and it also does not enter the chain of roles that begin with temptress. The roles that Lieb found as escape routes from this judgement for female pop stars are "diva", "gay icon", "protected status" or "legend", or to have a "change of [career] focus" (78). A lady is not a diva, but the roles have some similarity in the ways that they suggest an elevated female status that avoids the sexual objectification of the female performer.

Using the role of 'lady' can be humorous. For example, a joke on the need to name an overtly 'lady' version of objects and activities is seen in an online image of a "Lady Dictionary" which is provided to explain "Ladywords" (Figure 12) (North).

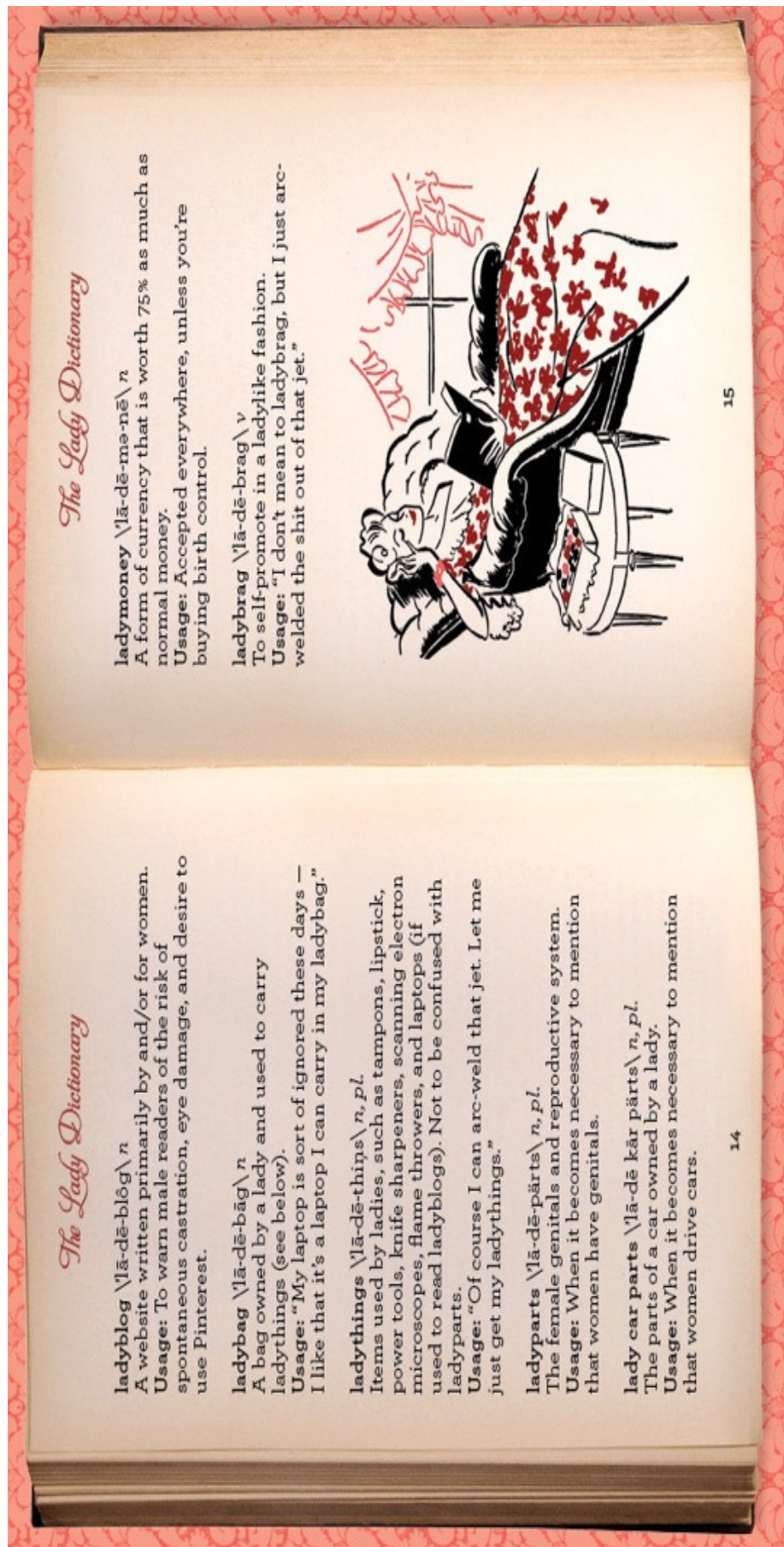


FIGURE 12. THE LADY DICTIONARY (NORTH)

As reinforced in this "lady dictionary", Ladi6's name can reference similar tongue-in-cheek meanings of 'lady' in circulation in global popular culture and social media (North). The prefix 'lady' can mean diminutive or limited in scope, seen in the lady dictionary in the terms "ladyblog" and "ladybrag". It can also be seen as a knowing joke on this meaning, as if poking fun at the difficulty with talking about feminine objects ("lady things") or genitalia ("lady parts")—a kind of false, knowing coyness. The tongue-in-cheek connotations of lady mean that a playful female role is being presented through Ladi6's name, and therefore in her personal brand. The playfulness suggested by using the role of 'lady' helps the possibility of Ladi6 escaping the judgements placed on female performers and their sexuality.

Ladi6's name is playful and references hip hop practice, while it is also associated with her status as a key female figure in Aotearoa-New Zealand hip hop. This status is connected to the fact that she performed in an Aotearoa-New Zealand "ground breaking" all-female hip hop crew, called Sheelaroc (Amplifier). Like Ladi6, Sheelaroc's name also reveals a performative emphasis on being female in a genre that has been called "masculinist", as it plays on 'she', and a now out-dated slang term for a woman, 'sheila' (deGenova 96). It also implies that 'she' is of 'the rock': of the beat, or of hip hop. 'Roc' also speaks of 'body rockin' or 'rockin' it', terms particularly identified with early hip hop, such as a DJ 'rocking it' or an MC 'rocking the mic' (read performing impressively), or the practice of naming dancers as 'rockers' (such as the Rock Steady Crew).

Ladi6's career has an impressive longevity, spanning her early days in Sheelaroc to her participation in Verse Two, her backing and guest vocalist slots in Shapeshifter, Fat Freddy's Drop and Solaa, and her own solo albums and tours. She points this out in the lyrics of "'98 Til Now", which is from the album *The Liberation Of ...*, released in 2010:

That's my signature song, you can't sample that ...

(Is it on? ... Ok. ... You ready?)

Chorus:

98 'til now been holdin' it down
 (I) got no time to play with fools, ain't no fuckin' around
 98 'til now been holdin' it down
 (Who? Who? Ladi ... 6)
 '98 'til now been holdin' it down

They said I couldn't do it so I had to go and prove it
 To myself, if no one else, yeah, I'm a lady in this movement
 But they do, oh they come, all different crews
 Got news for you, and you: I'm sittin' in my shoes

And from the beats and from the under-educated
 The nicest female rapper, always under-estimated
 I collaborate and knew that this would demonstrate my appeal
 And feel so I can kinda devastate

Even though I know I got no need to prove shit
 Won't let me stand bullshit
 What to do, I haven't got a clue
 I'm a winner in this game, got no time to lose

And they're still tryin' to test me, see who I'm kinda like, see, uh
 Is she kinda Lauryn, kinda Erykah, I might be, I'm feisty
 Hate it when people would try to rush me
 Do it in my own time, I'm pretty and I'm gutsy [Yeahhhh]

Playin' my own game and payin' my own way
 Got no bars if I choose no laws
 Got everything to gain, got everything to win
 It's like I just started out and I'm twelve years in

Did you feel me man, I feel myself
 It's like the world's got my back, the Universe as well
 It's swell, the admiration for the underdog
 There's a change in the wind, and it won't be long

Chorus x 3

The playful opening with slamming, statement hip hop is mixed with a sample of breathy beat boxing from "Dark Brown" on her previous *Time Is Not Much* album. This shows Ladi6 playfully referring to her previous work, and sharing a joke about having a "signature song" while still, in fact, making use of the "signature" sample

"98 Til Now" also signifies on the canonical conscious hip hop track "'93 Til Infinity" by Souls of Mischief (Souls of Mischief). Ladi6's lyrics signify on a canonical U.S.

conscious hip hop track. This is a translocal reference that emphasises her possession of hip hop knowledge, and proudly declares that Ladi6 is not a beginner. This is also an example of imagining a connection from Aotearoa-New Zealand to the United States and countering the idea that Aotearoa-New Zealand is culturally marginal, and thus making a political statement in a hip hop track.

Accordingly, the music video for "98 Til Now" shows Ladi6 and Parks striding and dancing confidently through Aotearoa-New Zealand streets as they mime the song. Ladi6 the performing artist is placed in a local context with its people, shop signs and flowers. The suggestion that this will keep happening is seen with the inclusion of Pacific Islander children, who join Ladi6 and Parks in striding, gesturing and 'popping' their way down the street. This video aligns Ladi6 with the convention of giving personal testimony as a hip hop participant, and of claiming superiority as an MC against would-be competitors. She presents herself as a female performer in the Aotearoa-New Zealand public space, on a video distributed online. This is political critique in the sense often attributed to conscious hip hop: presenting a marginalised identity with pride.

The pride presented in "98 'til Now" sees Ladi6 aligned with the qualities of being a conscious artist, by uplifting and being a positive role model for others (who literally include children mobbing her and dancing along with her on the street in the video). Ladi6 does not manage a record label like Urthboy, but she is a prominent female representative of Aotearoa-New Zealand music (Amplifier). This status has some correlation with the way that men such as Che Fu have been associated with the term "godfather of hip hop" in Aotearoa-New Zealand (Kinetik). Her use of lady is therefore a key part of her self-branding which makes her gender and status as central to her identity as an artist.

Political critique is being enacted through continuing to deploy this gender-first name that creates a new "herstory" of hip hop (LaBennett 110).

Ladi6's status as a beloved female figure reflects the dominance of conscious hip hop in Aotearoa-New Zealand, as previously outlined by Pauly Fuemana:

Groups like Wu Tang Clan, Tribe Called Quest lyrically, they're talking about real life. Others are just talking shit. No one wants to know that, not where I come from. We love our sisters, we love our daughters and mothers. No way I'm going to be calling her a bitch, you know? (Schwartz).

It is in the context of women (particularly women of colour) sometimes being called "bitches" in hip hop that Ladi6 positions her brand (Hunter; Hunter and Soto). Her association with an emphasis in Aotearoa-New Zealand on conscious hip-hop can be placed in opposition to the roles for women such as "bitch" rejected by Fuemana. Fuemana follows the tendency of some scholars to dichotomise conscious hip-hop's perceived values (of uplift and minority representation) with those of commercial hip-hop and align these with gender roles (Clay). In this dichotomised framework, commercial hip-hop is presented as exploitative and sexist and opposed to a presumed discourse of female empowerment and feminism in conscious hip-hop. The latter, importantly, aligns with a relatively conservative performance of female sexuality.

For women in conscious hip-hop, this opposition suggests that they are somehow free of the sexualised culture observed in, for example, studies of mainstream hip hop music videos (Andsager; Hunter and Soto). It is possible to make such a reading of Ladi6's costume choices and other visual elements in her own music videos, as well as photographs and performances that are housed in her personal brand.

The music video for the track "Dark Brown" for example, sees her styled as a Motown singer, rather than an object of the "pornographic gaze" (theladi6 "Dark Brown"; Hunter and Soto). Ladi6's stylised movement in this video mixes contemporary hip-hop gestural movement with a fluid motion of hands that recalls movements performed by

women in Samoan dance, where the movement of her hips is emphasised by a tasselled dress. Using some movements from Samoan dance in this context suggests that Ladi6 has ownership over her movement as it is connected to her cultural heritage, which she presents with pride.

A nostalgic style that invokes the soul musical era associated with Motown artists is also evident in her video for "Walk Right Up". Alongside shots of Ladi6 in contemporary hip-hop clothes, she nods her head as her cousin (and then high profile MC), Scribe, raps a verse (theladi6 "Walk Right Up"). This suggests that Ladi6 is the contemporary inheritor of the heightened status of being a lady, a role also occupied by Motown singers. As both the "Dark Brown" and "Walk Right Up" videos were directed by another of Ladi6's cousins, Oscar Kightley, there is a further suggestion of valorising both the Samoan director and a lady worthy of the aura of Motown classiness. The aesthetic in these videos builds a Ladi6 brand that works with the role of a lady, with a self-conscious wink towards being 'retro'.

Ladi6's choice of loose, draped dresses and tops, and the length of her dresses onstage can be read as 'sexy', but also 'classy', enacting a middle-class decorum. However, caution needs to be applied when celebrating a ladylike presentation in contemporary popular culture. The traces of "respectability politics" can be found in such a reading. That is, "respectability politics", or a form of self-policing by minority groups (Higginbotham), but particularly by African-American middle-class women, implies that conforming to certain standards of presentation and behaviour leads to political change (Hunter 31). This can limit sexual expression and be a form of public shaming.

Ladi6, however, does not simply perform respectability. She also plays with normative notions of femininity. For example, she sometimes wears black Doc Marten boots-usually associated with working class masculinity and punk subcultural style. These elements of her style can also be seen as gestures towards normative understandings of

popular music 'authenticity', which is generally coded as masculine (Coates 52). Here, Ladi6 subverts pop music's gender norms, while also building a personal brand. In this sense political critique is evident in her play with gender norms.

Ladi6 has a tall, statuesque body. Onstage, she stands firmly in a central spotlight, usually flanked by two male musicians (performing production and drums), I argue this is a corporeal enactment of "wrecking the space" (Pough 76), defined by Gwendolyn Pough as "moments when Black women's discourses disrupt dominant masculine discourses, break into the public sphere, and in some way impact or influence the U.S. imaginary" (Pough 76). The sense of disrupting a dominant masculine space can be extrapolated to the contexts in which Ladi6 performs and in which her self-branding is present (theladi6 "Dark Brown", "Walk Right Up", "98 Til Now", "Like Water"; Ladi6 and Electric Wire Hustle).

However, to make a distinction from the use of "wreck" to describe Black women of the "Hip-Hop generation" in Pough's work, I am terming Ladi6's self-created space for female Pacific Islander embodiment 'ladyspace'. 'Ladyspace' is similar to an idea introduced by Ronni Armstead of a "transgressive spatial practice" ("Las Krudas" 130). Ladi6's embodied claim to 'owning' her place similarly disrupts "Orientalist" and objectifying gaze (Armstead "Las Krudas" 130). She specifically claims space as a Pacific Islander woman while making use of the complex notion of being a 'lady', which is the reason that I apply the term 'ladyspace'. Just as with the term lady, however, a range of interpretations of the respectable or subversive elements (such as costume and the ways that Ladi6 uses her body and voice) of this ladyspace is possible. Political critique is, however, present in the *very act* of creating ladyspace in live performance and within a male dominated music industry.

The upfront presentation of the lady role complements the idea of personal liberation in conscious hip hop. In fact, the title of Ladi6's second album is *The Liberation*

Of ... The phrasing echoes Lauryn Hill's³³ *The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill* (Lauryn Hill). Hill's album has been viewed as a landmark work by a woman in a male-dominated field (Hobson and Bartlow 5). In both Hill's and Ladi6's cases, the titles suggest that the albums are in some way a revelatory fable about the 'character' of the artist. This reinforces the sense that they are producing conscious work; that the music of the album and all of its dispersed branded artefacts will inform the listener about how to be (mis)educated (or not), or else how to be liberated. This is congruent with the conscious genre resources that mythologise the political and personal expression possible through MCing (and in both of these artists' cases, also through singing). These albums *are* ostensibly the (mis)education, and the liberation, and are sold as such to the listener. This places the artist in something of a hallowed, or at least pedagogical, position; as they are liberated, it is suggested, Lauryn Hill or Ladi6 may inspire others to be similarly free. This suggests that the function of this role is indeed to "uplift"—in terms of conscious hip-hop—to use "a political education and the tools of critical analysis" to emancipate listeners (Peoples 29). Exactly how this may occur is not specified. Nevertheless, the use of these titles primes the listener to respond to the album in such a fashion.

Importantly, however, the works of both Lauryn Hill and Ladi6 suggest that the site of emancipation (from being uneducated, from not being liberated) is the individual. Instead of arguing for the rights of a people, the individual journey, performance, and brand are the site of education. In fact, *being me* or *becoming me*, is the goal. Indeed, Lauryn Hill's album title ends with her own name, and in Ladi6's case, it is implied (as in *The Liberation Of . . . Ladi6*). This can fall into the definition of "life politics", which is contrasted with "emancipatory politics ... [which] was an attempt to reveal the invasion of people's everyday lives by social and political forces of domination and exploitation" (Lury

³³ Now known as Ms. Lauryn Hill or Ms. Hill.

239-40 qtd Carah 157). Instead, life politics "concerns a reflexive relation to the self in which the individual is [concerned with] the negotiation of self-identity" (Lury 239-40 qtd Carah 157). Exhibiting life politics and an apparently 'realised' self-identity through the personal branding of a musician perpetuates the idea that *this* is the accepted way to be political.

While this conscious directive to preach and even embody a message to inspire others is visible in Ladi6's second album, the snag that uplifting emancipation hits is that it is also an exercise in self-branding. The people that appeared in the "98 'Til Now" video may feel uplifted by the experience, as may some of those who watch it. The fact that it is shot in Aotearoa-New Zealand with children dancing down the street being led by 'their lady' has a political implication. Pride is on display, both for marginalised people and their ownership of their 'place'. The video suggests that the children, and those watching, can be confident and inspiring like Ladi6, who has been "holding it down", and working at her career, from "'98 'Til Now". At the same time, the subtext of the 'message' (so important to 'conscious' hip-hop) of Ladi6's liberation is 'look at my (neo)liberated self and consume it', and 'you could also achieve self-realisation through selling who *you* are on the market'. In this sense, the embodied person of the artist and the perceived message of the neoliberalised labour and self-branding are linked. Ladi6's voice, face, body, movement and costume are linked to her music through a wide range of artefacts that push forward an overarching personal brand. Her physical self is a "unit" that performs "immaterial labour" that creates a "consumer norm" (Lazzarato 4). This consumer norm is subtler than the Adidas-branded one put forward by Run DMC. Instead it suggests that a positive attitude and pursuing a passion in an entrepreneurial fashion are to be emulated.

Ladi6's liberation-as-self-realisation runs counter to the idea that women's liberation has to be found through unbridled sexual expression, as found in so-called "raunch

culture" (Levy). However, if asserting a female presence, or ladyspace, requires a toning-down of sexual expression, this is not necessarily an escape from the objectification of women's bodies. Of course, a woman need not be "hypersexual" to be liberated; in fact, as Rosalind Gill has suggested, we could "add *compulsory (sexual) agency* as a required feature of contemporary post-feminist, neoliberal subjectivity" ("Empowerment/Sexism" 41).

Ladi6's signification on the role of being a hip hop lady can be read in several ways, from the presentation of political critique through creating a ladyspace to presenting humour or being subject to respectability politics. It is clear that she claims a connection to, and a space within, a conscious lineage that is overtly gendered. It is also clear that she is able to disrupt an exoticising gaze towards her body, which can be understood in an intersectional frame, that is, by also considering the way her ethnicity is represented.

Looking Out of the Frame

The context of Ladi6's female personal brand is her existence as a Pacific Islander woman in Aotearoa-New Zealand. This is seen in the cover art of her debut album, *Time Is Not Much* (Figure 13).

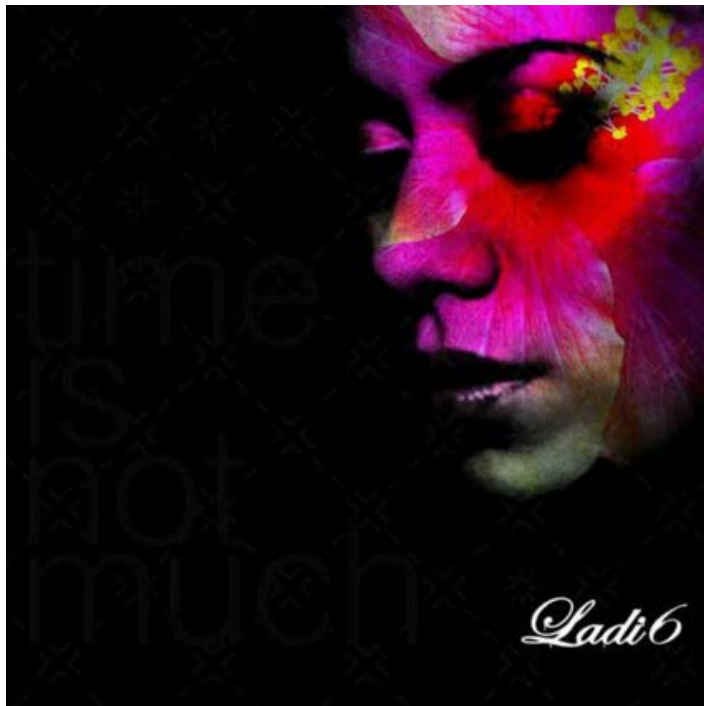


FIGURE 13. TIME IS NOT MUCH COVER ART.

The painterly image of a flower on Ladi6's face makes an abstract reference to kitsch and Orientalising 'Black Velvet' portraits of Pacific Islander women popular in the 1950s and 1960s. These portraits have since been reclaimed as nostalgic and apparently ironic vintage icons by interior-decoration enthusiasts (for example, see [darnsexysecondhand](#)). Male Samoan MC Tha Feelstyle has also used one of these portraits as the cover art of his album *Break It to Pieces* (Figure 14).



FIGURE 14. BREAK IT TO PIECES COVER ART (THA FEELSTYLE).

Re-signifying the Black Velvet aesthetic is complex. Its use by Pacific Islander artists suggests reclamation from an exoticising framing of Pacific Islander women for Western eyes and exploitation. However, it also complies with their nostalgic revival and shores up a myth that the mid-20th century was a simpler time when one could unproblematically appreciate a portrait of an exotic beauty. This escapist nostalgia has been described in a revival of rock 'n' roll, "fifties nostalgia intensified as the bummed-out, burned-out uncertainty intensified in the first few years of the seventies" (Reynolds 216). An analogous desire to be free of an awareness of postcolonial identity politics, and feel that the male gaze towards the image of a topless woman is unproblematic, is reinforced through the framing of such art as simply "retro chic" (Filmshop New Zealand). The allure of Black Velvet portraits draws on tropes of Aotearoa-New Zealand and its neighbours as occupying an idyllic, Pacific Eden located in an imagined past. This tropical paradise has a long history in literature and visual art, and is often represented by sensual 'dusky maidens' ready for the discovery by the White male explorer.

An example of this is evident in a documentary about these Black Velvet paintings. Titled *Velvet Dreams*, the documentary is described in an excerpt on YouTube as 'titillating' (Filmshop New Zealand). Its interviews are framed through the conceit of a gumshoe detective wanting to get close to the dusky maiden of his painted dreams (Filmshop New Zealand). This nostalgic emphasis on exotic beauty is continued in spite of the inclusion of comment from a Samoan reverend, who says that Samoan communities saw the Black Velvet paintings as "pornographic" and disapproved of them (Filmshop New Zealand). One such portrait by Charlie McPhee is titled *Velvet Dusky Maiden* (Figure 15) and was the basis for Tha Feelstyle's cover art:



FIGURE 15. VELVET DUSKY MAIDEN (DARNSEXYSECONDHAND).

Ladi6's *Time Is Not Much* cover, then, echoes the Black Velvet representations of Pacific beauty—she even wears a hibiscus in her hair. The emphasis however, is clearly on her face and her eyes are downcast, suggesting interiority; this is not a model exhibiting her face for the exoticising artist. In this sense she is using the resonance of these previous images, but suggesting a personal pivot on them.

Ladi6's personal brand subtly profits from her assuming the role of an admired Pacific beauty. However, this does not mean she occupies the position of an objectified Black Velvet maiden. Reverend Mua Strickson-Pua described the Black Velvet paintings as "*palangi*³⁴" (Filmshop New Zealand). In this sense, Ladi6's image fosters a sense of belonging among Pacific people with similar notions to Reverend Strickson-Pua's. This sense of a respectable 'ladylike' role model is, however, problematic, for the reasons of respectability politics already discussed.

By overtly referencing stereotypical depictions of Pacific Islander women, Ladi6 deploys essentialised tropes of 'race' as well as gender to further her brand. This intersectional presentation differs greatly from the way more mainstream female performers such as Beyoncé use race. According to Cashmore, Beyoncé's brand (and the industry of sales, merchandise, clothing, perfume, endorsements, and sponsorships it represents) aspires towards a "post-racial" America, where "'race" is not within her [Beyoncé's] range' (Cashmore "Buying Beyonce" 137). Cashmore sees Beyoncé's brand as emblematic of the idea that, under advanced capitalism, Black artists should focus on individual success rather than on racism and inequality (Cashmore "Buying Beyoncé" 137).

More recently, Beyoncé performed her track "Formation" at the 2016 Superbowl, with Black female dancers sporting 'natural' hair and wearing sexy, Black Panther inspired costumes. Like the ammunition belts crossing her breasts, this performance, a day after the release of the single, had a quasi-military precision in furthering Beyoncé's brand. A *Saturday Night Live* sketch, which was turned into a widely spread gif, showed Black characters bemused as their White colleagues realise with shock that Beyoncé is black (Love/Hate). This ambiguity around her ethnicity, and the fact that some White

³⁴ Foreign to Samoan culture, often White.

commentators thought a 'political' performance highlighting race was inappropriate for the family entertainment of the Superbowl, suggests that White audiences had indeed read Beyoncé as Cashmore suggested, as being "beyond race" ("Buying Beyoncé" 137). This clearly differs from Ladi6's brand appearance, which deploys overt signifiers of *Polynesian* femininity.

Ladi6's 2008 signification and subversion of the exoticising Black Velvet genre joins those of fellow Pacific Islander artists, such as the *fa'afafine*³⁵ visual artist Shigeyuki Kihara (Milford Galleries Dunedin; Rosi). Ladi6 reclaims a Pacific Islander cultural practice (of wearing a hibiscus behind the ears), which has its own significance outside of the exoticising frame of commercial Western art reproduction. Echoes of the hibiscus motif are used in Ladi6's music videos and merchandise, suggesting a personal use of this reclaimed cultural material to further her self-branding.

She does this through a subversion of visual signifiers. *Time Is Not Much* cover art is an abstract, digital working of a painterly portrait of a Pacific Islander woman. The deep black has a crispness and no longer flirts with an innuendo of dusky brown skin and, perhaps, vaginal mystery. By choosing to reference and then update this art, Ladi6 presents a fresh interpretation of the identity of a Pacific woman, who is more than an exotic beauty to admire, but who is in fact the active, creative artist, as seen in the inclusion of her logo/graffiti tag, 'Ladi6', in the bottom right corner. *She* is the writer here, and not just a 'muse'. The elegant font of her name reflects the connotations of being a 'lady', its narrowness and slant speaking of a design aesthetic that doesn't need to use fat, stereotypically masculine fonts or graphics to participate in the hip-hop genre. Ladi6's portrait in this cover art reclaims in actuality the *apparent reclamation* of Black Velvet

³⁵ As Rosi writes in her profile of Kihara, a *fa'afafine* is "a man who identifies as a woman in a traditional transgender role, considered anomalous in New Zealand" (Rosi 72).

works as retro kitsch. This is an example of a politically critical use of branding, one that "disrupts an orientalist gaze" and creates space for a woman in the male-dominated music industry (Armstead "*Las Krudas*" 130). In this instance the branded artefact, the cover art itself, conveys political critique as it performs a reclamation of identity while being widely distributed.

Another representation of Ladi6's physical self is used on an inside page of the cover booklet of *Time Is Not Much*. A photograph shows Ladi6's hand-playing keyboards, featuring a tattoo on the back of her hand that is a diamond pattern interspersed with stars. This pattern is also echoed on the front cover, in a light grey superimposed over the black background. Using this imagery positions the album as an intimate expression of the body-similar to a tattoo. The photograph of Ladi6 playing keyboard also portrays her as a creative and musically able Samoan artist. The image could also be read as a nod to Pacific cultures being respected for their *tatauing* (tattooing) histories, and as having reached aesthetic heights and rich levels of meaning with their tattoos (Ellis; Thomas et al.; Wendt). The pattern is used in Samoan *malu* tattoos, which are positioned on some women's thighs. The placement on Ladi6's hand is a personal interpretation of a traditional identifier. These images of Ladi6 as a working, creative musician suggest that both her tattoos and her music are personal reflections on being situated in current cultural practice. Again, this differs from Beyoncé's claim to be 'universal' as Ladi6 includes specific cultural identifiers (Cashmore "Buying Beyoncé" 144).

Nevertheless, like Beyoncé's, and all other personal brands, Ladi6's self-branding is traded and judged in a capitalist media context of commodity consumption. Even a personal and bodily element of a brand such as a tattoo can become abstracted into a commodity; like "the object of the logo or trademark . . . [it] can now become the sign of a definite type of social identity, which summons consumers into relationship with it" (Hearn

"Meat, Mask, Burden" 199). In the case of images of a musician, even the culturally important and feminist implications of being a Samoan lady in contemporary popular music are bound into a system that invites listeners to be consumers, to primarily consider whether they are 'buying into' the individualised Ladi6 brand. This is parallel to the observation that, in advertising, "women's liberation metamorphosed into female narcissism unchained as political concepts like liberation and equality were collapsed into distinctly personal, private desires" (Douglas 247-8).

However, in significant contrast to the example of advertising Revlon products that Douglas writes of, or of the entire "industry" of consumer items that Beyoncé's brand fronts, Ladi6's brand is relatively small-scale, and is based around her activities as a musician (Cashmore "Buying Beyoncé" 139). Her brand is primarily associated with her recorded music and live performances, but also appears on certain selected commodities. One example is, perhaps surprisingly, a tea-towel (Figure 16).



FIGURE 16. LADI6 TEA TOWEL. PHOTOGRAPH BY PEDRO ALTUNA.

The choice to include a tea-towel in her suite of merchandise could suggest a domestication of the liberated lady. This object also suggests a reconstituting of domestic space as it can be displayed as artwork on a wall. It can be used to decorate a space cheaply and signal support for an independent female musician, aspects that may appeal to students, fellow artists, or interior designers looking for an object that is not mass-produced.

At the same time, this is an aestheticisation of a 'working object' that can be used to dry dishes. In contrast to Urthboy's stubbie holder, this introduces an object marked as feminine into domestic space. This is a novel form of merchandising for a musician that can make a useful object merely decorative. Ladi6's brand is also brought into domestic contexts via a slightly humorous object. This suggests that there is some levity in her self-branding, and that her "personal brand statement" acknowledges her fans' everyday lives (Arruda). Even as Ladi6's brand uses a lady role, and seems above mundane realities such as doing dishes, the object suggests that she does not take this status entirely seriously, which conveys that she is also approachable.

The use of Ladi6's face on this tea towel also resonates with the *Time Is Not Much* cover art (Figure 13) with its sense of interiority or soulfulness. Screen-printing on a tea-towel speaks of a do-it-yourself aesthetic that appeals to those who love small-run, handcrafted products. Screen-printed tea towels and tote bags are produced by small art and design businesses (Sad Ghost Club). This so-called 'hipster' approach to handmade and 'low-tech' items is an aestheticisation of thriftiness and declares difference to the expected manner of consuming mass-produced brands.

This object that has been screen-printed with a Ladi6-branded-image was made in Pakistan and printed by Graphics On Shirts New Zealand. On the website for the shirt-printers there is a page titled "Organic and Fair Trade Options", which includes the text,

"[w]e at Graphics on Shirts Limited do not believe in forcing or coercing anyone into purchasing Fair Trade. We understand completely that sometimes it just isn't possible to afford or find what you require from an ethical supplier" (Graphics On Shirts). By offering justification for using sweatshop produced items to customers to print on suggests that there is a strong possibility that the tea-towel may have been produced with 'non-ethical' labour. The deployment of Ladi6's brand *is* a part of making ladyspace in a male dominated field, yet hidden production processes in a branded product such as this belie her 'consciousness'.

In this way the tea-towel has a do-it-yourself aesthetic yet makes use of mass production and distribution methods, and so can be open to the critique of the 'unethical' nature of these methods. Relatively small-scale, independent artists such as Ladi6 differ significantly from Beyoncé or the pop stars studied by Lieb in both their aesthetic and the scope of their merchandise (Cashmore "Buying Beyonce"; Lieb). However, even in a tea-towel hanging on a fan's wall, the underlying logic of self-branding, of making abstracted use of a self-image to emphasise individual success and a relationship of consumption, is still present.

A Conscious Soul

The key aspects of Ladi6's personal brand are that she presents a female, conscious, and soulful take on being a part of Aotearoa-New Zealand hip hop. For example, a promotional blurb for a free concert states that she "has been a vital part of the NZ hip hop scene since its inception" (Winter Games NZ Trust 2015). It is debatable however, whether Ladi6 is 'strictly' hip-hop. She also draws on production and vocal styles from electronica, soul, and reggae: the same blurb emphasises that she has developed a

"smoky soul sound" (Winter Games NZ Trust 2015). Furthermore, her collaboration with other Aotearoa-New Zealand acts such as all-female hip-hop act Sheelaroc, and jazzy hip-hop group Verse Two have played with genre mixing. She has also been a guest vocalist with Fat Freddy's Drop and Solaa, who draw on reggae, electronica, funk and jazz style and instrumentation.

Nevertheless, Ladi6 distinguishes herself through self-branding copy that emphasises her position as a 'conscious' artist. For example, a phrase that recurs in her promotional blurbs (on print media profiles, her CD liner notes, and on the interconnected network of music promotion websites) describes her work as possessing "socially conscious lyrics" (for example, ladi6.com). Ladi6's personal brand demonstrates conscious hip-hop's imperative to highlight social issues. For example, in a media interview, Ladi6 described the influence upon her of her Samoan parents, who "started up a youth centre in Christchurch, [and] founded a women's refuge ... They were always bringing work home with them, kids home with them-they were social workers" (Gilchrist 3). A key detail used to promote a documentary filmed about her return to Tanzania was that she lived there as a teenager while her parents volunteered for community initiatives (Glucina). However, rather than overt political critique in her lyrics, Ladi6 works with conscious hip-hop's generic trope of uplift. For public figures, the choice of themes and elements in their brand is meant to result in this uplift.

Similarly, descriptions of Ladi6 often claim that she is "sublimely soulful" (ladi6.com). This is implicitly placed in opposition to other musicians, who are implied to be 'superficial'. This works in a similar way to the metonymy outlined by Norma Coates, where "rock is metonymic with 'authenticity' and masculinity, "pop is metonymic with 'artifice'" and femininity (52). While not figured as masculine as rock, soul-based genres

also use opposition to artifice and so are associated with depth, or performing 'genuine', authentic feeling.

An example of this reflective quality is the title of *Time Is Not Much* . . . Using the mind or imagination to transcend everyday challenges is an optimistic theme that Ladi6 explores in her lyrics, such as when she sings in the track 'Walk Right Up' from the *Time Is Not Much* album:

We're gonna walk right up into the light ...
When the shit's goin' down, I'm gonna hold you up (Ladi6 2008).

There is potentially a sense of communal solidarity here. However, these kinds of encouraging lyrics can also be used to bolster the confidence of the individual who listens, and no more. The sense of mutual support conveyed by "[w]e're gonna walk right up into the light" is in fact kept in a dyad; Ladi6 is an individual who is going to "hold" one other person up. Feeling uplifted by hearing this song does not, in fact, address the political problems of Ladi6's "people", or if it does, it is framed so generally that the meaning is lost. Offering a 'salve-all' of encouragement can in fact keep people from questioning the social and economic systems that they are embedded in. This sense of 'uplift', or offering an apparently intimate encouragement can be employed by listeners to participate more efficiently in an economy that prefers cutthroat competition and individual focus to communal causes.

Reflecting Transcendence

Ladi6 features on a track by genre-crossing Aotearoa-New Zealand outfit Solaa, titled "Sylphlike". In the lyrics, abstract, uplifting notions are again invoked:

Cherish every moment for they are all that we have
Like a river time is flowin' on and on (Solaa "Sylphlike").

A sylph is a "slender, graceful, lightly moving woman or girl", or else, "one of a race of imaginary beings" that "inhabit the air" (Macquarie Dictionary 1771). The music video uses images suggestive of cosmic waters and an animated process of creation. Ladi6 and the musicians from Solaa are visually splashed with images of stellar explosions and cellular life. The title, together with the cosmic theme, suggests a feminine creator, addressed in song by Ladi6:

Eternal creation nurtured us with infinite love ...
Mother creation, we must return to your love (Solaa "Sylphlike").

The lyrics evoke being in a cosmic womb and yearning to go beyond the physical boundaries of selfhood. The track is a prayer or cry to a feminine creative force. This is a radically different expression of spirituality to the emphasis on Christianity in Samoa and the Samoan diaspora, as typified in the phrase on the Samoan crest, *Fa'avae I Le Atua Samoa* (Samoa is founded on God). The title could also suggest that Ladi6 herself is 'sylphlike' and contains some of the qualities of feminine divinity that she is invoking. There is a sense of yearning to return to the popular conception of imagined historical matriarchies, or at least to a feminine aspect of spirituality, which is here invoked as peaceful. This guest spot also connects to, and uses, Ladi6's brand as a soulful lady.

The track "Oneness" from the same Solaa album is credited on the compact disc cover as "Solaa feat. [featuring] Ladi6". The title connotes the catch-cry of much popular music (in particular, reggae and hip hop genres) of "one love", stemming from Bob Marley's lyrics from the song of that name, and often repeated as sung lyrics or as a spoken 'call' to the audience or listener (Bob Marley and the Wailers). 'Oneness' more broadly speaks of an imaginative, humanist, connection across ethnic, social, and political boundaries, and also a unity in, and perhaps through, music. From the credits and the title, an optimistic note is sounded even before the track is played, one that invites a listener

into the relationship, into 'oneness'. The use of the term and its implications also connects these performers to 'brand oneness', or all other works using this idea.

In fact, 'oneness' can be deployed as part of the visual branding of an individual. Ladi6 extended her branding, both as a lady and a soulful, spiritual messenger, in the costume, videos, and photographs associated with her second solo album, *The Liberation Of ...* (2010). In particular, her use of a gold cowl, which is worn with other outfits for performance and music videos, casts her as bathed in light (Figure 17).



FIGURE 17. LADI6 LIVE (LADI6 AND ELECTRIC WIRE HUSTLE). IPHONE PHOTOGRAPH BY AUTHOR.

This suggests that she is bringing a metallic royal presence and a clever design aesthetic that uses the 'essence' of the hood, and its connotations of hip hop, street culture, and being a wise prophet or hallowed figure.

This pixelated iPhone photograph of a live performance in Sydney is an example of the dispersed artefacts that make up a contemporary musician's brand. This suggests that costume choice is highly self-reflexive, as some artists will now be aware that they will be photographed, filmed, 'saved', and 'shared'. In this sense, even if they are playful or have a personal meaning to the performer, these items that form part of an artist's brand can

also become part of their audience members' own sense-making about music and performance in their lives. The trace of the performer's branded self can be found in audience member's personal files and consumption practices.

In this photo, Ladi6 uses both the brightness and illumination of gold against the depth of a black backdrop. She has continued to use this combination of bright yellow/gold and dark purple/blue/black in her costumes, stickers, and posters associated with *The Liberation Of ...* A precursor is seen in the bright yellow compact disc itself used for *Time Is Not Much*. Bright yellow-gold is associated with various ideas of light in spiritual and religious traditions (for example, the Christian halo). This forms part of the visual branding that is dispersed in concrete objects, digital files and in-person performance. Even when performing lyrics with 'depth' and uplifting others 'right up to the light', using the branded self reinforces the idea that a focus on the individual is preferable to a focus on social causes or a critical focus on the people who benefit from the status quo. This performance of a 'conscious lady' who reaches out to others circumscribes other modes of being political.

Conclusion

Ladi6 mixes the Motown lady of soul, the Black Velvet Pacific beauty, and a contemporary Samoan woman in her personal brand. Her self-branding also positions her as a positive Samoan role model, and is aligned with the lineage of ladies and queens established by female conscious hip-hop artists. This signification on the role of being a woman of elevated status is connected with motifs such as the hibiscus to effectively brand *this* lady as a Samoan incarnation.

As Ladi6 is a female Samoan MC and singer who has performed in Europe and Australia, this representation through performance does revise stereotypes of what it means to be Pacific Island woman in hip-hop. In this sense she both "wrecks the space"—pushes forward her female identity within hip hop—and "disrupt[s] the classificatory eye's Orientalist gaze" through her physical performance (Pough 78; Armstead "Las Krudas" 130). The agency asserted in Ladi6's performance can be met with relief and encouragement, as heard in the audience member's shout while waiting for the next song at a Ladi6 show, "Come on, Lady!" (Ladi6 and Electric Wire Hustle).

Ladi6's use of the lady role has some ambiguity, but it moves along the conscious end of a hip-hop genre spectrum, where the rhetoric of uplift is meant to inspire both social progress and respectability in listeners. This may be acceptable within Pacific Island Christian culture, however, Ladi6's emphasis on female liberation suggests an ambiguity about what being 'respectable' entails. For example, the religious echoes found in Ladi6's style are reinforced by her gestures to a feminine, creative force of 'oneness', which is a continuation of the reaction against "claustrophobic self-contained church communities" through Pacific Islanders' participation in hip hop (Colchester 171).

In the physical space of live shows, and in recordings and online videos, Ladi6 is a prime example of 'conscious' political expression and critique through her very presence. Her creation of a 'ladyspace' in contemporary popular music disrupts an exoticising gaze towards a woman of colour. This intervention in a sphere credited with contributing to a sexualisation of culture is significant. However, its aptness to be used to promote a limiting respectability for women is problematic. Similarly, an experience of 'oneness' found in Ladi6's work is commodified. The limit to the expression of uplift is that it points back to a system that places a performer as the individual, charismatic beacon who must lead others

in a "walk right up to the light" (Ladi6 "Walk Right Up"). Further, this object normalises the importance of personal branding as a means to individual success.

Nevertheless, self-branding is used as a personal object in the daily lives of listeners who pick up a sticker with a copy of her CD at a live performance, which may then become faded over time (Figure 18).



FIGURE 18. THE LIBERATION OF . . . STICKER. PHOTOGRAPH BY PEDRO ALTUNA.

A sticker can also be used to 'personalise' something, such as a laptop, which, when used in public, means that Ladi6's brand is displayed by the individual. Seeing this sticker (which could also be stuck on a public pole or wall) can inspire reflection about 'the liberation of' women and 'ladies'. Listening to and moving to music and attending performances by a female performer such as Ladi6, can also be a hopeful and imaginative experience of feminine divinity and embodied female agency, or ladyspace. Individuals can make their own meaning out of such an experience.

However, from an analytical perspective, the limits of self-branding remain evident. Branding is a level of abstraction for trade away from the performer, which produces artefacts, both virtual and concrete. This level of abstract promotion can engender the same cynical response in listeners who are constantly being subjected to branding in an advanced capitalist era. This cynicism responds to the fact that branding is executed as a

part of trying to acquire cultural or monetary value, a motivation that can make some wary of other apparent motivations, such as spreading political 'consciousness'. In this way the existence of a commodifiable brand is inherently de-politicising, even if politically critical messages are expressed by a performer in the components of that brand. Self-branding encourages a relationship of consumption to be present alongside political allegiance with any emancipatory message a performer communicates. The system of branding also places pressures on individuals to submit themselves to a "neoliberal governance of self", which can actually *include* being an (apparently) 'liberated' individual—rather than focusing on structural inequalities and collective action (Laverne and Lozanski). Optimistic experiences of 'ladyspace' made possible through interacting with Ladi6's brand actually return attention to the importance of self-branding itself, which is a feature of the neoliberal era (Gershon). This normalises an atomisation of individuals and a focus on individual concerns. This fragmentation of individuals concerned with their own reputation means that even interacting with a 'conscious' performer's brand in fact encourages seeing others as competition in the attention economy. In these ways the branded self of Ladi6 is currently both a medium of, and a hindrance to, her political critique.

Chapter 4: A Larrikin Leader

Urthboy is a prominent example of an Australian hip hop artist who is self-reflexive about the conscious MC's imperative to be, as the title of one his tracks puts it, a "modern day folk singer" (Urthboy "Modern Day Folks"). Describing himself in this way suggests that he draws on the backward-looking antiquarian balladry of folksong. Yet, another aspect of folksong is that it addresses contemporary social ills and is therefore constantly being modernised. As explored in the literature review, the characterisation of (specifically 'conscious') hip hop as a "protest music" suggests that, like folk song, it presents political issues in a critical manner (Stapleton 225). However, instead of being backward-looking, in hip hop this protest music has been characterised as speaking about the present, as heard in the idea of the "hip hop generation" (Chang "Can't Stop"; DJ Kool Herc 12; Rose *Black Noise* 30).

This chapter explores how hip hop, a genre which is associated with the United States of America, Blackness, masculinity, and boasting is re-defined in Australian terms by using the tools of local culture. This is specifically discussed through an examination of Urthboy's self-branding. I consider if Urthboy's gender performance draws on White male Australian stereotypes such as the larrikin to produce a 'conscious' mode that is politically progressive, but also ironically aware of its dependency on capitalist commodification. Included in this discussion are Urthboy's solo tracks "No Rider" and "We Get Around", The Herd tracks "0.77" and "I Was Only Nineteen", together with photographs, press clippings, and novel forms of merchandise, such as an Urthboy-branded 'stubbie holder' and an Elephant Traks-branded baby 'onesie'.

Keeping Up with the Great Elsewhere

Hip hop, as a relatively new import to the Australian music scene, is sometimes viewed as a musical form that is not embedded in Australian culture, bodies, and land; that it is only ever an adopted costume or posture with shallow roots, doomed to be provisional (Overell; Tall Paul). In this view, hip hop is only, to use Urthboy's own phrase, an American "black art form" whose pimping progenitors are ridiculous and offensive, made more ridiculous by their imitation by Australian 'White boy' MCs (Urthboy feat. Nay and Mantra; Overell). For these critics, hip hop is 'un-Australian', a franchise that sits atop the Australian country, even if some have argued that hip hop was "born global" (Kelley xi).

In Michelle de Kretser's 2007 novel, *The Lost Dog*, she casts a poetic eye on Australia's cultural contradictions:

It was true that local characters and scenes slotted effortlessly into a global script. Muscled teenagers in big shorts crowded the nation's shopping malls. On neat estates where every house replicated its neighbour, young women pushed babies of such plush perfection it was difficult to believe they would grow up to eat McDonald's and to pay to have their flesh tanned orange. There was comfort to be derived from this sense that the nation was keeping up with the great elsewhere. What claim does a new world have on our imagination if it falls out of date?

But a stand of eucalypts in a park or the graffiti on an overpass might call up a vision of what malls and rotary mowers had displaced. Australia was LA, it was London; and then it was not. Here there was the sense that everything modern might be provisional: that teenagers, news crews, French fries might vanish overnight like a soap opera with poor ratings. The country shimmered with this unsettling magic, which raised and erased it in a single motion (124).

The idea that the Australian land can "erase" "everything modern" is an established theme in Australian nature writing, in which authors frequently stress what seems ancient in the Australian landscape (Tredinnick). Of course hip hop did come from "the great elsewhere", yet as scholars from Tony Mitchell to Renae O'Hanlon have argued, Australian hip hop has been "indigenised" (O'Hanlon 194). This means not only localised, but also modified in unique ways to become distinctively Australian. Thirty years after its

arrival, hip hop has stayed, and, in the last decade, flourished, particularly considering the vast distances between Australian cities and its small population. Yet, as it came from the “great elsewhere”, it is still threatened by the idea of “erasure”.

The arrival of hip hop is generally agreed to have occurred, as in many places around the world, via videos on MTV such as 1982’s *Buffalo Gals*, and the hip hop-themed features *Wild Style* (1983) and *Beat Street* (1984) (Kelley xiv). *Beat Street* featured a battle between the early breaking crews, the Rock Steady Crew and the NYC Breakers.

Indigenous boys in the inner city Sydney suburb of Redfern, along with boys with a variety of ethnic backgrounds in Western Sydney, were among the first young people to imitate the breaking and graffiti they saw on screen (Maxwell; Mitchell “The New Corroboree” 21). Munki Mark, an Indigenous MC in one of the earliest Australian crews, Def Wish Cast, was interviewed by Tony Mitchell in 2006, who notes that Mark

suggests the Indigenous hip hop scene, often invisible and inaudible in the many debates and oral histories that have been rehearsed in the music street press and numerous website forums about the origins of Australian hip hop, may have got started ahead of other scenes (“The New Corroboree” 21).

Munki Mark’s suggestion points to the fact that the Australian hip hop scene echoes the “creation narrative” of hip hop’s genesis in the Bronx by granting some early practitioners the status of being pioneers or godfathers (LaBennett 110). The performers Morganics, (Morganics), Koolism³⁶, Def Wish Cast, and South West Syndicate have been assigned godfatherhood because they took up hip hop practice early on and put out some of the first music releases, but most importantly, because they continue to produce work, unlike other early “novelty” artists who have “sunk without a trace” (Mitchell “Australian Hip Hop” 240). This mythologising of these men as godfathers of the Australian hip hop scene places men at the centre of the historical narrative. This foundational narrative excludes figures that don’t fit the group who claim ownership of the form. This exclusion

³⁶ Comprised of DJ Danielsan and MC Hau Latukefu.

continues after the initial time of the 'pioneers', and continues to normalise the ongoing participation of boys and men. This normalisation of male practitioners in the story of Australian hip hop marginalised female artists such as Macromantics, SistaNative, and Candy Bowers (Bowers; Macromantics; SistaNative).

The invention of a hip hop canon is common to other local scenes, and of course to American hip hop, where the narrative of the form as a solely African-American innovation has also worked to exclude "[t]he first graffiti writer of note ... a Greek kid from Washington Heights whose distinctive tag was Taki 183 ... [a]nd Puerto Ricans and other Latinos [who] have been central to hip hop from its inception" (Kelley xi). The Australian hip hop historical narrative locates the roots of Australian hip hop in low socio-economic areas such as Western Sydney, which fits with the hip hop narrative that equates creative authenticity with being 'from the streets' (Keyes *Rap Music*; Maxwell; Mitchell "Australian Hip Hop"). This works to suggest a class solidarity which subsequent Australian hip hop participants work with or against when exerting their conscious MC brand. This account of the development of hip hop in Australia suggests that participants in Western Sydney were able to present marginalised identities through their participation, which is a political activity. At the same time, the re-telling of this foundational narrative in Australian hip hop works to marginalise others, such as female participants.

If there are similarities in the construction of hip hop 'creation stories' globally, there are also differences in how the form manifests itself at each local site. In Australia, for example, there exists a "tall poppy syndrome", or "[being] suspicious of the kind of free-flowing unconcealed ambition or pride that often stems from becoming too successful" (Peeters 21). The attribution of 'godfatherhood' and jostling for status that is a familiar part of hip hop is tempered in Australia by this tall poppy syndrome, which works as an Australian version of proving authenticity. Therefore, there is a noticeable wariness in

Australian audiences towards hip hop performers who give themselves ‘props’, even as it is a part of the form of hip hop. For example, DJ Danielsan of Koolism said onstage, after winning the first Best Urban Album Award at the ARIAs³⁷, “[b]e yourselves, keep it real, enough of that American wannabe trash” (Mitchell “Australian Hip Hop’s Multicultural Literacies” 237). Here an aspect of hip hop is modified to suit local cultural conventions. An important part of the masculinity mobilised in American hip hop performers, that of ‘big-noting’ oneself—or as described in a discussion of gangsta, responding strategically to the “everyday struggle” of living in a ghetto—finds friction with the pressure placed on Australian MCs to avoid being ‘tall poppies’ (Collins 912-3).

Another important aspect of Australian hip hop is its use in the education and community sectors. Some ‘godfathers’ such as Morganics have facilitated hip hop workshops in Australia. This hybrid form of hip hop performance/pedagogy is now widely spread, and many artists undertake this work (Mitchell “The New Corroboree; Mitchell “Australian Hip Hop” 46-7; Local Noise). Facilitating workshops and programs in, for example, youth centres, community centres and juvenile detention centres continues hip hop’s association with underclass youth who are ‘at risk’ (of dropping out of school, and becoming unemployed or incarcerated), and who need to be re-directed to a better life through a creative activity (Desert Pea Media; Indigenous Hip Hop Projects; Mitchell “Australian Hip Hop” 46). This echoes Afrika Bambaataa’s stated aims for founding the Zulu Nation (Keyes *Rap Music* 157). From my own participation as a facilitator, performer, and audience member at such events, it is clear that facilitating hip hop activities as a way of mentoring young people has established a place in the community and educational sectors (Hip Hop Duende). The idea of using hip hop as a form of education and mentoring has been taken up by Urthboy, as he has facilitated MCing workshops and also

³⁷ Australian Recording Industry Association awards.

mentored young people in behind-the-scenes music industry work (musicnsw; Sound Summit). This kind of work is political in the sense that it seeks to address inequality of opportunity and provide pathways to improved education and employment prospects and socioeconomic status for young people. For Urthboy, the political aspects of his work are mostly found in the roles of record label manager, solo performer, and band member. In each of these roles he speaks publicly about political issues, and expresses the need for more ethnic and gender diversity in Australian hip hop (Condon; Urthboy “Modern Day Folk”; The Herd “0.77”).

For the Boys

Other Australian hip hop artists who have used hip hop to promote ethnic diversity include Sleek the Elite, whose representation of a wog³⁸ identity is heard in his 1997 album, *Sleekism* (Sleek the Elite). He also played a Lebanese rapper/pizza shop worker in the SBS television comedy *Fat Pizza* and spin-off feature film, *Pizza* (SBS). Experimental crew Curse Ov Dialect includes artists with Macedonian and Māori heritage, and its members refuse pigeonholing of their identities through their subversive use of ‘ethnic’ costumes and various languages—even as their name plays on their difference from normative Whiteness (Raceless, Atarungi, August the 2nd, Volk Makedonski, Tony Mitchell and Astrid Lorange).

Killaqueenz and fellow female Australian artists of African heritage perform and record in Australia, such as Okenyo, Tkay Maidza, Muma Doesa and Sampa the Great. Some crews have been multicultural in the sense that they feature performers from varying backgrounds, such as former Sydney act Foreign Heights, which included female Fijian-

³⁸ A derogatory term for Mediterranean and Middle-Eastern Australian, which is sometimes affectionately reclaimed, such as in the hip hop, film, and television examples included here.

Australian MC Trey, female Mexican-Australian Maya Jupiter, and male White Australian DJ Nick Toth. Similarly, performance, video, and digital art projects such as Hip Hop Projections 5 at ICE³⁹ have been produced which featured Pacific, Latino, and African performers. MC Trey described in her promotion of the event on a printed flyer:

Oz hip pioneers built lyrical foundations, similar to indigenous storytellers who continually bless the nation. Pacific drums beat, as African jazz inter-weaves. Battle MCs spit rhyme, while soul singers release. B-boy funk and Latin turntablism, theatrical stage overseen by sketch n projections. Martial artists meet parkour [sic] crew, over head-nodding tracks and rhyme saying review.

These examples show the presentation of non-White identities in hip hop, which works to valorise marginalised people as a form of public, political work.

Some high profile Australian hip hop compilations include some female artists, but they are in the minority. For example, Triple J's *Hip Hop Show* in 2005, compiled by then-host, Maya Jupiter, featured one track by a female MC, with some brief appearances by three other female artists out of a compilation of 40 tracks (Australian Broadcasting Corporation *The Hip Hop Show*). As Koolism's MC, Hau Latukefu, commented when he tagged Indigenous female MC Nay into a YouTube "RapperTag" sequence of videos, "it was just all guys and I just went, 'Well if I don't do it now ...'" (3ree6ixty; pers.com). The unspoken implication of Latukefu's comment is that the dominance of well-networked male hip hop artists in Australia means that if he didn't tag a female MC, no-one else would (pers. com.). This idea was repeated by the female DJ MzRizk in a video that asked various Australian hip hop artists about "Sexism in Australian Hip Hop" (L-Fresh "Sexism"). This demonstrates that hip hop performances, and the networking that surrounds them, can valorise a local Australian identity, yet exclude women.

Despite the presence of female artists, male artists feature in the official methods of recognition for Australian hip hop. Examples of this prominence include Koolism winning

³⁹ A Western Sydney organisation, Information and Cultural Exchange.

an 'urban' music award at the ARIAS in 2004, where they were joined onstage and at an after-party by the DJ credited with hip hop's beginnings in the Bronx, Kool Herc. Melbourne's TZU, which features the MC, Joelistics, were nominated for the Australian Music Prize for 2005 (DIG Internet Radio). Adelaide Hills act, The Hilltop Hoods, won ARIA (Australian Recording Industry Association) awards in 2006 and 2007 (Mitchell "Australian Hip Hop's Multicultural Literacies" 241). MC Phrase was nominated for two ARIA awards in 2009 (ARIA). The Hilltop Hoods have since been nominated for, and won, multiple ARIA awards, and achieved multiple platinum sales⁴⁰ (Australian Recording Industry Association).

Even with the promotion of ethnic and gender diversity in some quarters, the majority of prominent Australian hip hop artists are White and male, from artists seen as godfathers such as Morganics, to the 'newer breed' achieving wider industry and audience recognition, such as The Hilltop Hoods. For example, whether exposed to an Australian hip hop track in a café, on the national youth radio station *Triple J*⁴¹, watching the long-running music video show *Rage* (ABC), or attending a music festival, it is easy to infer that Australian hip hop is largely about 'boys', as female MCs Shannon Power, Chelsea Jane and Nay, together with DJ Yo! Mafia reflected in a media interview (Power, Jane, Wenitong and Mafia).

Australian hip hop shows are also still largely male affairs, something that hip hop artists themselves joke about, heard in a line from Down Under Beat Crew's track, "Rowdy Night Out", "it's another sausage party again", which alludes to all of the penises in the room Down Under Beat Crew). This was true for many performances that I observed (Elefant Traks "Urthboy: Spitshine Tour; "Elefant Traks 10th Anniversary Party; "Urthboy:

⁴⁰ In Australia, platinum refers to 70,000 album sales (Australian Recording Industry Association "ARIA Charts Accreditations").

⁴¹ The Australian Broadcasting Corporation's youth radio station, which has promoted (some) Australian hip hop, has a hip hop show, and meets a quota of 50% Australian music played.

Sneakquel Tour"; Last Kinection et al), although subsequent Urthboy solo shows actually showed a more balanced representation of gender (Urthboy "The Past Beats"; Urthboy, Okenyo, and L-FRESH THE LION).

This gendering of hip hop as male is heard in an interview with the prominent Australian hip hop act, The Hilltop Hoods, even as they say that their sixth album "is a statement against bigotry full stop—xenophobia, racism, homophobia and sexism" (Hebblewhite). In the interview they compare the phenomenon of their music reaching a broad audience to the image of "some chick dancing to this record at her local RSL⁴²" and fielding the question of whether they have sex with groupies (Hebblewhite). Here, a disparaging equation between "a chick dancing" and someone 'mainstream' and therefore not discerning is made. The myth of White rock musicians being normalised as male and asked if they have sex with female groupies is here transferred into hip hop. Tony Mitchell found Ian Maxwell's observations of an overtly masculine Western Sydney hip hop 'world'

unsurprising, given [hip hop's] origins and development among young African-American males in city ghettos throughout the United States, and the misogyny (continually referring to women as 'bitches' and 'hos'), homophobia and violent posturing masculinity in the lyrics of African-American hip-hop are well known ("Australian Hip Hop as Subculture" 7–8).

Even if we accept Mitchell's characterization of African American hip hop, scapegoating the "young African-American males" for the gendering of hip hop as male in Australia does not take away from the contradiction of male Australian MCs who see themselves as inclusive of different identities, yet who also participate in the normalisation of male dominance in the local context.

In the following section I take a closer look at one key compilation of Australian hip hop to explore the ways in which hip hop's gendered legacies are given a particularly

⁴² Returned Services League Clubs that were founded for war veterans, now synonymous with cheap food and alcohol.

Australian twist. This lays the groundwork for considering the way Urthboy's self-branding as a conscious MC is refracted through the version of masculinity created by Australian hip hop artists.

A Bogan Barbeque

The *Home Grown Volume 1* compilation of Australian hip hop assembled and mixed by DJ Flagrant is particularly symbolic of the ways that male dominance in Australian hip hop is normalised (DJ Flagrant *Home Grown*). It was the first of a series of compilations that were promoted as the “best” of Australian hip hop, which states that those who were included were the best artists in the country, even though they were overwhelmingly male (Grindin). This suggests that the male artists that were included experienced fewer barriers to their participation in Australian hip hop than female artists did.

The album demonstrates the way in which making hip hop ‘Australian’ has involved the revival of some key stereotypes of Australian White men, notably the ‘bogan’. The origins of the term are elusive, but ‘bogan’ broadly refers to working class White people from outer suburbs who are seen as uncouth (Donlan 41). A recent example of a television representation of aspirational bogans is the comedy series *Kath and Kim* (kath&kim). ‘Bogan’ is itself an updated version of ‘ocker’, a term for males who were figured as comical in their excessive misogyny, hard drinking and swearing. Prominent examples of ‘ocker’ included Paul Hogan’s ‘Crocodile Dundee’ character from feature films of the same name, his shrimp-barbequing appearance (as himself) in Australian Tourism Commission advertisements, and the fictional dying stockman of Rolf Harris’ “Tie Me Kangaroo Down, Sport” (Crocodile Dundee; RandomVideos576; Rolf Harris).

Since then, “‘bogan’ has ‘edged out ‘ocker’ and ‘hoon’ and the regional terms ‘chigger’, ‘bevan’, ‘booner’ and ‘westie’ to become the byword for all that is rough, ready, unintelligent and undesirable in Australian culture” (Ireland). The attitude towards the bogan figure can vary from affection, to identification and ownership, to embarrassment and anger that this was (and in more recent Tourism Australia advertisements, still is) an exported image of Australians (Feneley).

Bogan is heterosexual, working-class and male: even if women fall under the category it is a nominal inclusion in this domain and they have secondary status. This reinforces that “notions of Australian identity have been almost entirely constructed around images of [White] men” (Connell "Introduction" 9). The bogan refuses to be refined and reacts to the opposing figure of the middle-class “White man in crisis” (Bode 1). Similarly, the preceding figure of the ocker was a “celebration of national identity that was based on a mythological and disappearing working class” (Kirkby 252). In fact, a study of bogan culture in the Illawarra region of New South Wales, Australia, concluded that

economic and cultural dimensions have been decoupled – boganness today is more about taste than income. In the past, safely segregated in less affluent suburbs [bogans] were easily identifiable by their mullets and Winnie Blues⁴³. These days, they can just as easily be found in Kirribilli⁴⁴, wearing designer sunnies and drinking cosmopolitans (Ireland).

Importantly, bogans could also be listening to “Aussie hip hop” at a summer festival, according to the “Things Bogans Like” blog (Ireland). These people may no longer have “mullet” hairstyles or smoke “Winnie Blues”, but they could own an Urthboy stubbie holder. This *symbolic* assumption of *an aesthetic* of working class Australian masculinity has traces of United States hip hop masculinity in it, and yet boldly declares its difference from the US version. Australian hip hop fans may not be living in ‘the ghetto’, but they can knit the myths of hip hop and the bogan identity together to perform a masculine protest. This

⁴³ Winfield Blues, a stereotypically working-class brand of cigarette.

⁴⁴ An affluent suburb of Sydney.

performance of allegiance with, and difference from, the masculinity of United States hip hop is strategic gender work that seeks to claim ownership of the genre.

Examples of ‘bogan-ness’ in Australian hip hop (or to use alternative terms, Aussie, Ozi, skip, beer, or barbeque hop) are heard in the prominent use of a demotic Australian accent, textual references to local phenomena, and the mention of characteristic social activities such as barbeques. Of course, barbeques are not only an Australian phenomenon, but are signified on within the Australian context to signal a shared experience, to invoke ‘who we are’.

A pertinent example of this ‘bbq-hop’ and its assertion of a masculine presence in Australian hip hop is heard in Mass MC’s track, “BBQ Song”, which appears on the *The Best of Australian Hip Hop Volume 1* (Nate Flagrant). The track includes a feature spot by female MC, Thorn. Nevertheless, it is associated with Mass MC’s male voice and broad Australian accent. It is important as it shows how other ethnicities—in this case Italian heritage—are subordinated to white male masculinity.

The track begins with a slapstick description of a “hip hop BBQ”:

I was half totalled and fully fresh
I bowled like Tony Walker at a wack⁴⁵ barbeque
Beers to top it off with black Sambucca chasers
Looked in my pocket, [what?] lost my pages [damn]

Two MCs near the garage, one was rhymin’
The other beat boxin’, both out of time and
A kid was following me with his rhyme book
Showing me his toy verses, I told him they were bomb

Be strong ‘cos it’s a jungle out there
I sat down and went right through the chair
I must be havin’ a bad day, it’s twenty past
Took my thongs off and stood on a piece of glass

Tripped over and put my hand on the hotplate
Knocked a schooner of beer in the DJ’s crate
Someone let off a firecracker and burnt my hair
Stuff ya hip hop BBQ man, I’m outta here

⁴⁵ “Wack” is (dated, so therefore often comic) hip hop slang for bad.

[Chorus] I'm comin' to your barbeques man, no more ... (Mass MC feat. Thorn)

Even though Mass MC, aka Gianni Valente, is of Italian heritage, the references in this track show the 'wog' identity being assimilated into a White male Australian stereotype. For example, the references to "Black Sambuca" and the opening sounds of a ring tone and a voice speaking in Italian place the MC as Italian-Australian, yet the song is filled with stereotypically White Australian references. These include the name of the cricketer "Tony Walker", the staple summer shoes or "thongs", calling a barbeque a "hotplate", the size of a drink being described as a "schooner of beer", and fireworks being called a "firecracker"⁴⁶. These references to local phenomena are mixed in with attempts to make this barbeque particularly 'hip hop', heard when misfortune befalls "my pages" or an MC's written book of rhymes, a reference to "the DJ's crate" (of records), and despairing that a "kid was following me with his rhyme book". The scene described is a slapstick, self-deprecating take on being both 'Australian' and 'hip hop', as when, for example, beer is spilt into the crate of records. While slapstick, this track seeks to naturalise the combination of the imported practice of hip hop and the 'quintessentially Australian' activity of a barbeque.

To do this, terms such as "wack" signal a connection with global hip hop culture (Mitchell "Australian Hip Hop as a Subculture" 42). "Fully fresh" is an amalgamation of Australian English and AAVE. "Fully" (for emphasis, 'very') is an example of a slang term associated with 'wogs' that has become part of the Australian vernacular. Mass MC's pronunciation, with a long 'oo' sound and falling cadence signals a 'wog' accent, and is also heard in comic productions of a broad wog identity such as the film *Wogs Out of Work* and Sleek the Elite's appearances on *Fat Pizza* (Paul Fenech; Sleek the Elite). The incorporation of "fully" into a wider Australian vernacular can suggest an affectionate

⁴⁶ Fireworks are now illegal in most areas, but are part of a mythologised history of raucous Australian barbeques.

inclusion of ‘wogs’ into the national character, specifically through an affectionate inclusion of men (Paul Fenech; Sleek the Elite). “Fresh”⁴⁷ is a part of AAVE but is also incorporated into this ‘wog’-influenced Australian vernacular. Putting “fully” and “fresh” together at the beginning of the track presents a male Australian hip hop character upfront.

“The BBQ Song” received play on Triple J and was included in a compilation album, *The Best of Australian Hip Hop Vol. 1* (Nate Flagrant), where it is the most obviously comic track. One blogger described it as one of the album’s “downfalls” (Guy). Yet the approach on this track has resonance with others that are included in other ‘official’ compilations of Australian hip hop, such as “The Waitress Song” by Seth Sentry and “The Festival Song” by Pez feat. 360 (Seth Sentry; Pez, 360 and Hailey Cramer). These also straightforwardly address the topic of their titles and include self-mockery by the male MCs as they describe being in love with a waitress or getting drunk at a festival. Typifying the attitude of not taking yourself, or even ‘Australian hip hop’, too seriously, these tracks highlight the importance of humour in Australian hip hop, something that Urthboy takes a step further with his use of the larrikin stereotype in his brand, as discussed later in this chapter. The importance of this self-mocking, yet highly masculine approach is also seen on the cover of *Home Grown Compilation Vol. 1*, which was compiled by Nate (DJ) Flagrant⁴⁸ (Figure 19).

⁴⁷ New, stylish, attractive.

⁴⁸ Also known as DJ Flagrant.



FIGURE 19. HOME GROWN COMPILATION VOL. 1 COVER ART (DJ FLAGRANT).

This is an example of cover art that displays an Australian hip hop identity. Elements within this image can be read as ‘bogan’. The green and gold associated with some Australian sporting teams as well as the Southern Cross constellation just above the title both evoke the nation. Although the Southern Cross features on the Australian flag and in the national anthem, the image of the constellation has come to be associated with a xenophobic insistence on specifically White Australian culture, proliferating in recent years in tattoos, clothing, and bumper stickers, most commonly associated with the race riots in Cronulla in 2005 and often seen in public on the national holiday, Australia Day (AAP; Dart).

The Southern Cross became associated with the “race element because at one stage [it was used] by the National Front, a far-right organisation back in the 1970s, but before that it was adopted by various communist groups ... by the left, the right, and the centre of Australian politics” (Dart). The Southern Cross is a constellation visible to all of those in the Southern Hemisphere, not only in Australia. However, the recent localised symbolism, that associates it with young, White males, has a particular, provocative significance. A well-known Australian hip hop MC stated in a personal communication that

now you have people just, just listening to Australian hip-hop you know and so it gets a bit ugly you know, all the Southern Cross tattoos on the shows and, which is I always it's, you know it's not always a bad thing but you know, just a negative stigma attached to, to that and the flags (pers. com.).

This “creepy paranoid streak, the sharp end of flag-waving national pride” which was perceived in ‘ocker chic’ culture in 1987 is also used in the *Home Grown* cover art to claim ‘Australian hip hop’ as a naturalised domain for young White men (Thomas 50). This gives a serious edge or a “sharp end” to the insistence on such ‘joking’ representations of Australian hip hop fronted by White men. Indigenous male MC Jimblah, when asked by the Sikh male Australian MC, L-Fresh the Lion, about racism in Australian hip hop, answered:

People keep asking me about it, and it's, well, does Australia have a problem with racism? And the answer is yes, man, like, there's no 'ifs' or 'buts' about it ... and that's filtering down through Australian hip hop (L-FRESH The Lion “Racism”).

This racism can take the form of who is commonly included as part of ‘Australian hip hop’, who is perceived to be ‘native’ or ‘natural’ to the genre. Correspondingly, the *Home Grown* cover image shows a DJ gardening at home, which suggests a domestic, suburban context, as if to emphasise that it is normal for hip hop to ‘grow at home’ in Australia. This also presents a hip hop version of the ‘great Australian dream’ of owning a home on a quarter-acre block with a garden. The title and the image also plays on home-grown marijuana, implying that like good (or strong) drugs, the hip hop in this compilation is home grown, which emphasises the localised pleasure of producing, supporting, and consuming music. The compilation title is also reminiscent of the unintended effect of former Prime Minister Gough Whitlam’s fostering of national identity through the arts, namely that “[e]verything home-grown became precious, achingly significant, invested with patriotic magic” (Thomas 50 qtd Kirkby 252).

Thirty years after Whitlam, this “precious ... patriotic magic” has morphed into a xenophobic slogan, ‘we grew here, you flew here’, that is seen on bumper stickers. The emphasis on ‘growing’ in Australia as a statement of ownership is linked to the guilt and displacement associated with being a colony established through invasion, and is also a display of xenophobic pride. In what follows I explore how Urthboy’s brand must walk a fine line in its effort as a White man to steer clear of such forms of xenophobia whilst simultaneously fashioning an identity as a politically conscious MC that is recognisably Australian.

Branding Protest

Urthboy’s identity as a conscious MC was first established through his involvement with The Herd, and in particular with the Herd’s landmark track “0.77” (but colloquially called “77%”) from 2003’s *An Elephant Never Forgets*. The track was released in response to the controversy surrounding the ‘children overboard’ affair in 2001, when false claims were circulated by the government and media that a boatload of asylum seekers, who had been rescued by the Norwegian freighter, the MV Tampa, were throwing their children into the water (National Museum of Australia). This prompted vicious public displays of racism towards the asylum seekers (National Museum of Australia). The “77%” is a reference to a survey result that “77% of Australians agree with (then Prime Minister) John Howard’s actions on The Tampa”, which was quoted on talkback radio, and a sample of one such broadcast was mixed into The Herd’s track (“0.77”). The track combines both traditional elements of hip hop music, such as a prominent, bass-heavy beat, with other features that ground the track in the Australian context. A slow jazz opening is overlayed with a channel-hopping audio collage of media coverage of the Tampa incident, including a

sample of John Howard's distinctive Australian voice and punctuated by his vocal habit of a drawn-out "ah". He says, "I wish that this ... ah ... problem were not ours". A loud drum kit answers this angrily. In contrast to Howard's slow, drawn-out phrase, the rhythm pushes forward ahead of the beat, and sounds live, or at least in the foreground of the mix. The beat, and the bass line which soon begins, reference the Eric B and Rakim song "Paid in Full" (Eric B. and Rakim). This is not thematically significant, but using this reference does signal The Herd's homage to, and knowledge of, these canonical U.S. hip hop artists. MC Ozi Batla⁴⁹ begins rapping as if he is sitting in a pub:

Schooner of Old thanks mate ... cheers ...

Well I'm left sitting here, starin' into a beer
 Shakin' my head, the same old loathing and fear
 Stranger in my own land, can't understand
 How the very word 'Australian' has just been damned

The lyrics use Australian idioms whilst expressing disgust at how the label 'Australian' has been taken over by the far-right and made into a nasty, exclusive weapon. Ozi Batla identifies himself as "skip⁵⁰, Whitey, round eyes", yet asserts an Australian identity that is disgusted by what has been enacted in the 'national interest'. This is hip hop as a "protest music", commenting on a contemporary social issue (Stapleton 225).

The threats of violence, such as "buy you a beer with an arsenic chaser/better off dead, is that what I said?" are directed towards the conservative "talkback squawking hacks", such as Alan Jones, Stan Zemanek and John Laws; "mainstream media"; and more specifically, the "Channel 9" commercial television station, who foster the "prejudice mentalities" of the "sheep" that make up the "77%". In the sixth verse, Ozi Batla refers to the traditional saying that Australia "rode the sheep's back" to economic prosperity and

⁴⁹His alias clearly references the White male Australian stereotype of being a 'little Aussie battler' or a working class underdog, with hip hop spelling. His debut solo album was fittingly titled *Wild Colonial*.

⁵⁰ Slang for 'Skippy', the Lassie-like kangaroo character from a children's television show of the same name, and also a colloquial term for White Australians.

echoes former Prime Minister Bob Hawke's famous remark in 1988 that the 'lucky country' needed to become a 'clever country'—itself a reference to Donald Horne's description of Australia as the "lucky country run by second-rate people who share its luck" (Horne)⁵¹.

The shattered remnants of Aussie dignity
I'm a skip, Whitey, round eyes, surprise me
Use your shriveled brain and 'Please explain'⁵²
How the clever country just went down the drain

We rode the sheep's back, now the sheep ride you
If this is how it's gonna be don't call me true blue
I denounce my ancestor's wounds still fester
If you say 'it ain't so' I suggest you wake up

Significantly, Ozi Batla reverses both idioms to describe an Australia that is being ridden by sheep, and a clever country that "just went down the drain". He refuses to be co-opted into the xenophobic rhetoric that characterised the official Government explanations of the Tampa incident, by rapping "don't call me true blue". Even though his Australian English accent is as broad as John Williamson's in the patriotic folk song "Hey True Blue", where 'true blue' means truly Australian (Williamson).

In this fashion, "0.77%" creates a very recognizable portrait of a working class Australian man, having a beer in the pub, swearing at the "rich redneck pricks" and the "cunts" in the government—but combines this image with the role of the critical, conscious MC, an artist who might point out that Captain Cook was the first queue jumper⁵³, who is capable of making connections between racist attitudes towards asylum seekers and the abuse of Aboriginal men in Australian jails, as depicted in the music video for the track (HomishBoy).

⁵¹ Former Prime Minister Bob Hawke's remark in 1988, when opening the National Science and Technology Centre, Questacon, that the "lucky" country needed to become a "clever" one, began the thorough overuse of this next cliché, the clever country (Lowe).

⁵² An infamous phrase associated with far right politician Pauline Hanson, who has been ridiculed when using this phrase to signal that she doesn't understand a reporter's question (and which has now become a slogan of hers).

⁵³ A colloquial phrase to deride asylum seekers, particularly those who arrive by boat, as trying to get ahead of other, more well-deserving migrants.

The lyrics of “0.77” are not just associated with Ozi Batla, but also with the other members of The Herd. This is because the entire band often join in with the raps, even if not directly into a mic. In particular, the other MC (who has consistently throughout The Herd’s existence been Urthboy) does reinforce some of Ozi Batla’s lines into a mic. At live performances audience members also join in, their arm gestures contributing to a display of outrage. This suggests a broader sense of ownership of the lyrics beyond a single MC, which suggests that the political sentiment being expressed is not just Ozi Batla’s, and that he is ‘speaking for’ the social conscience of others.

The Tampa affair occurred shortly before the attack on the World Trade Centre and Australia’s entrance into conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan on the heels of the United States. This period was described by Ian Maxwell as “horrendously bleak: the claim to sophisticated multiculturalism paraded in the [2000] Olympic spectacles has been thoroughly shown up as a White man’s dreaming” (xvi). The Herd’s oppositional take on John Howard significantly shaped their position as ‘conscious’ artists and appealed to an audience looking for creative opposition in such a “horrendously bleak” context. As The Herd and Urthboy’s career progressed, they were at times depicted as political representatives of their generation. For example, in 2008 an independent Sydney radio station stated in its e-newsletter:

Fiercely political, unashamedly Australian and massively popular, the Herd tick three boxes where most of our pollies fail to tick any ... We’ve voted for the Sydney group by making it our Album of the Week on FBi, so now all that’s left is for the group’s MC Urthboy to put on a suit and get himself elected (FBi Radio).

This consciousness of speaking for a generation is very much present in Urthboy’s track “Modern Day Folk Singer” from his 2007 album *The Signal*. In this track we begin to see the particular spin that Urthboy will place on the role of the conscious MC and the elements that will play a key part in his personal brand. “Modern Day Folk” stakes out the territory of a conscious hip hop artist as Urthboy proclaims that his taste is opposed to the

“next sensations” or the “FM sensations,” the short-lived popularity of commercial acts. He distinguishes himself from stereotypical ideas of the gangsta rapper by claiming he is no “dope slinger” and rejects the sexualisation of more commercial forms of hip hop, noting that “no relationship was started on a wet dream.”

Yet this is not the naïve stance of “[s]ixties rock culture [which] thought it could ignore the sales process, and ended up another commodity” (Harron 194). As the title of the track implies, Urthboy presents himself as a modern version of the protest musicians from the sixties, yet one who, coming after them, cannot share their naïvety. While he exhibits his knowledge of earlier folk singers like Bob Dylan, comparing the challenge of hip hop music to the day that “Dylan went electric”, Urthboy also references well-known conscious hip hop artists such as “A Tribe Called Quest.” In this track we also get a hint of the humour that runs through much of Urthboy’s lyrics and music. At the end of the track he is self-deprecating about being a modern-day folk singer, saying conversationally:

In the fine folk song tradition ...
 I’m trying to save the world ...
 If anybody would just listen ...
 Got to be engaged ...
 Ha ha, I feel like strumming a guitar right now ...
 Can I get some earnest singin’ right now ...
 I like that ...

The musical elements of the track avoid the ‘earnestness’ that Urthboy associates with folk singing through its use of sampled guitar sounds and a guitar layer that consists of an ascending slide. This slide sounds like a guitar recording played backwards, suggesting a playful, inverted hip hop sample of a folk song guitar part. The guitar and the electronic sample are thus positioned as playful rivals, where the electronic sound tonally reverses the guitar. This suggests Urthboy is responding to the folk tradition as a hip hop artist. Yet, he does not declare an exclusive commitment to hip hop, which has become a

cliché in determinations of an artist's credentials as authentic (DJ Kool Herc; Support Australian Hip Hop). The very fact that in this track Urthboy is willing to express a joking affection for folk music such as "The wind blowing your bridge over troubled water down/but don't worry, we'll sort it out", is an example of how Urthboy restyles the image of the serious conscious MC to create something more approachable and acceptable to Australian listeners.

It is also, however, an example of the limits of political critique expressed through an individual's brand. Much as Carah has written about experiential branding, self-branding of an MC such as Urthboy "is symptomatic of the identity and lifestyle politics of the post-modern era, where political projects are increasingly envisioned around particular causes rather than holistic political demands" (15). Correspondingly, Urthboy and The Herd have taken an oppositional position on politicians such as former Prime Minister John Howard and particular issues such as the Tampa affair, with attention as a result flowing to those particular issues as expressed through the brands of the performers. Therefore, Urthboy is half-jokingly endorsed as the next Prime Minister. One possible intervention in this kind of individualist attention is the emphasis on The Herd as a collective and the Elephant Traks label as a 'community'.

The Elephant Family

Urthboy went to school and first started MCing in the Blue Mountains. The inner west area of Sydney which he currently 'represents' is associated with a multicultural population, left-leaning voters, university students, and the march of increasing gentrification. Online and on stage, in tweets and freestyles, Urthboy may call both 'the mountains' and the inner west of Sydney home. This is a local signification on the hip hop

practice of expressing a deep emotional and physical connection to place (Forman). Urthboy explicitly raps about growing up in the Blue Mountains and gives his own take on its effect on his music in “Orphan Rocker” from the 2012 album, *Smokey’s Haunt*:

The full mountain blood that runs under my city skin
 Lost in tell-tale signs I’m fitting in
 Where I’m from is a part of me and I ain’t givin’ in
 More than recollection up in your memory bank

My background led me to lower the tempo (it’s true)
 Like a wound-back brand new year retro
 Trickle got us slow ‘cos I like em and on that note
 That’s why I like roots reggae, rocksteady and folk (Urthboy “Orphan Rocker”).

He also acknowledges the history of hip hop in greater Western Sydney on the track titled “Don’t Sideline Me”, “inner west, outer west, stay fresh” (Urthboy feat. Lior). Live, he has thanked punters for travelling across Sydney to the show “from the South” and “from the West”, conspicuously omitting the East and the North, areas that are associated with wealth and privilege (Last Kinection, Horrorshow and The Herd). But Urthboy’s assumption of the traditional role of the MC to ‘represent’ goes beyond conventional invocations of place to invoke a broader community. The clearest example of this is the close association of Urthboy’s brand with Elephant Traks, the record label that Urthboy both cofounded and manages.

The Elephant Traks label was established in 1998, with the aim of producing a party compilation of its members’ tracks (Elephant Traks “Food to Eat Music By”). This has a similar small-scale, D.I.Y (do it yourself) focus to that often attributed to early punk (Frith 159). Whilst providing entertainment, the label is known for producing music as a vehicle for expressing social consciousness. This idea is reproduced in the media, as seen in the statement, “[s]ince its inception, Elephant Traks and the Herd have always been associated with politically based music” (Foskey; Pulse Radio). Many of the artists signed to Elephant

Traks are not only MCs or DJs but share histories of activism, such as the political ‘sound system’, Combat Wombat. Others have shown their dedication to furthering hip hop in Australia by organising events, such as Elf Transporter, who worked on both *Phat Logic* and *Hip Hop Thursdays* in Melbourne. In 2015 Elefant Traks was described as part of a new wave of hip hop fighting racism (Australian Broadcasting Corporation “Hip Hop’s New Wave”). Many of the artists who have joined the label in recent years have strengthened that reputation, including female MC Sky’High, who claims “Scottish, Aboriginal and Fijian roots”, The Last Kinection, who are an Indigenous hip hop act that features sister and brother MCs and vocalists Nay and Weno together with DJ JayTee Hazard, the solo Indigenous male MC, vocalist and producer Jimblah, and the Sikh male MC L-FRESH The Lion (Elefant Traks “Elefant Traks”). As Urthboy is credited in interviews as an Elefant Traks “co-founder”, the label’s focus on furthering inclusion and diversity in Australian hip hop feeds into his self-branding (Pulse Radio). This suggests that he has a political aim that he is enacting through his work as a label manager.

The central element of the Elefant Traks brand that represents all of these acts is the logo. Variations on this image are seen on the Elefant Traks website, on CDs, DVDs, LPs, street posters, stickers, t-shirts, women’s tops, and hoodies (Figure 20).



FIGURE 20. ELEFANT TRAKS LOGO (ELEFANT TRAKS "SOUNDCLOUD").

The logo connects the notion of political and musical expression with a large, wild animal. The force of a herd of elephants is likened to the network of Elefant Traks artists and fans. This connection is explicitly established in titles such as *Trampled*, a remix album of Elefant Traks artists' tracks, that draws on the punning link between the 'tracks' left by a herd of elephants and the tracks laid down by a hip hop artist (Levinson and Harrison). This suggests that the music 'tracks' leave social 'tracks', and like an elephant's foot, they carry weight. The elephant is not an iconic Australian image, but the choice of this name suggests that the tracks (misspelt purposefully as 'traks') of the label are similarly 'phat' and impressive.

The fact that elephants socialise in family groups reinforces Elefant Traks' image as an egalitarian collective or an alternative family. This is heard when Urthboy shouts out to "my Elefant Traks "fam"⁵⁴:

It's a special dedication to my Elefant Traks fam
 My hip hop fam
 All across the land
 Inner West, outer West, stay fresh (Urthboy feat. Lior)

Invoking allegiances outside of a nuclear family, town, school, workplace or country suggests that political stance and a love of music are the drivers of the community of 'Elefants'. Prominent artists of Elefant Traks are the band, The Herd, whose members also co-founded the label in the sense of being involved in the first compilation of music. Their name also riffs on the association of elephants and working as a group, as seen in the print on this worn and slightly puckered The Herd t-shirt (Figure 21):

⁵⁴ Family.



FIGURE 21. DETAIL OF THE HERD T-SHIRT. PHOTOGRAPH BY AUTHOR.

This t-shirt print evokes migrants arriving with luggage. The implied connection to refugees is registered not only in the Herd's raps but in their donation of performances for events raising money and visibility for refugees. For example, they headlined the Building Bridges Festival with proceeds towards Refugee Action Coalition in 2012 (Refugee Action Coalition). This establishes a political comment on a contemporary issue as a part of The Herd's branding. The image on this t-shirt has a disquieting sense of that human heads were cut out and elephant ones were pasted on, which is a form of visual violence that gives the image 'edginess'. This suggests that, like this item of their branding, The Herd present "confrontational protest music" (Stapleton 221). In Mattern's terms, they are presenting "resistance, opposition, and struggle" to the dominant discourse about asylum seekers (33).

As the elephant-headed people are pictured as migrants, The Herd identify in this image with people sometimes depicted as 'Other', for example, the asylum seekers who featured in the media coverage around the 'Tampa affair' (National Museum of Australia). This identification is reinforced by The Herd logo featuring on one of the bags, so that

these figures are also suggested to be The Herd themselves who carry bags as touring musicians. This sense of changing places with migrants displays empathy but also slides into the practice of speaking for others, which in fact lacks political awareness, or 'consciousness'. In this sense, although this image conveys an 'edgy' sense of opposition to the dominant discourse about asylum seekers, a dangerous sleight of hand exists as The Herd present 'us' as being just like 'them'.

The Herd line-up has endured some changes of personnel. This was referenced in Urthboy's onstage joke at the Elefant Traks 10th Anniversary Party event in Sydney that it was great to be re-joined by MC Berzerkatron, who "was from The Herd 1 or was it The Herd 2" (Foggo). As live instrumentalists and, in particular, the vocalist Jane Tyrell, have joined The Herd it has shifted from a few young men to become a prominent example of a large Australian hip hop act that is a sprawling force onstage (Figure 22).



FIGURE 22. THE HERD LIVE (ELEFANTTRAKS.COM).

This is unusual for an Australian hip hop act, which often feature one or two MCs and a DJ (for example, Bliss 'n' Eso, The Hilltop Hoods, Thundamentals, Pez, Pegz, Illy, 1200 Techniques, Drapht, Spit Syndicate, Muph and Plutonic, Dialectrix, 360, Diafrix). This sprawling force reinforces The Herd's association with collectivity. Urthboy's personal brand associated with this sprawl, which suggests that he goes beyond individualist concerns. The idea of The Herd being a collective within a broader 'family' of Elefant Traks

enthusiasts is brought to bear on another novel form of merchandise, an Elephant Traks baby onesie (Figure 23).



FIGURE 23. ELEFANT TRAKS BABY ONESIE. PHOTOGRAPH BY AUTHOR.

This item of clothing suggests that the baby that wears it is not only joining their own family, but also the broader family group of ‘Elephants’. Elephants also feature in clothes, toys, and décor for babies, so this onesie can happily co-ordinate with other items in a baby’s life. This cute version of the Elephant Traks logo stretches the record label’s brand association with young adults. Transferring the Elephant Traks brand into the domestic context of looking after a baby is a tongue-in-cheek suggestion that babies can be ‘dressed up as’ conscious hip hop fans, which can extend their parents or carers’ association with the brand by including it in their domestic life. Producing this item of merchandise suggests that some Elephant Traks fans have the identity position of parent, or at least someone who buys clothes for a baby. It is also yet another example that “[p]opular music is commodified in a myriad of ways beyond the performance and recording of music” (Carah 65).

A branded cotton baby onesie has a pragmatic use and brings the Elephant Traks logo into a novel context. It is an ironic, playful extension of the usual hip hop merchandise of t-shirts and hoodies, where the joke is, ‘look how hip hop I am, I have a baby!’ The idea of an ‘Elefant fam’ implies a network of people who are passionate about

political change and music, and this idea is materialised when this brand is printed onto baby clothes. There is potential political critique in this network, which Urthboy heads. Yet, the fact that the Elefant Traks brand is materialised in this form means that some attention returns to the brand *itself* when interacting with a baby that is emblazoned with the logo. Although the brand of a record label differs to that of an individual, a similar process of signalling connection with the “brand culture” is evident (Schroeder 123). A fan may choose to signal their solidarity with The Herd’s social commentary by buying and using this object, yet the object itself reinforces that the correct way to be political is to make use of brands.

The idea that Elefant Traks and its network of fans, or ‘fam’, could perform political work is, however, visible in the increasing amount of diversity in the label’s ranks. In addition, Urthboy’s self-branding as someone who supports women and people of colour through hip hop is importantly demonstrated through his musical collaborations on stage and in recordings. In particular, he has had a key collaborator in vocalist Jane Tyrell, who joined The Herd as it’s only female member, and was a part of the Urthboy solo shows act for several years. She has also featured prominently on some of Urthboy’s solo recordings and videos (Figure 24).



FIGURE 24. SCREENSHOT. URTHBOY FEAT. JANE TYRELL "SHRUGGIN'" (RHYTHM AND POETRY).

For several years the Urthboy solo show line-up has featured both Tyrell and Urthboy roaming the front of the stage. At times each has claimed the central position and been highly interactive with both each other and the audience (Elefant Traks "Urthboy: Spitshine Tour; Urthboy et al; "Urthboy: Sneakquel Tour). The physical and musical room given to Tyrell's singing prowess and onstage banter suggests a respectful relationship between the two artists, and therefore that Urthboy is not entirely bound to the deeply homosocial norms of Australian hip hop (Elefant Traks "Urthboy: Spitshine Tour; Sydney Opera House; "Urthboy: Sneakquel Tour).

Urthboy has also collaborated with Nat Dunn, who features as a vocalist on his solo track "Ready to Go"; the Indigenous female singer and MC Nay, who features on "Fight Fire" on *Spitshine*; and Mia Dyson, who features on "Over Before It Began" on the album *The Signal*. His 2016 album, *The Past Beats Inside Me Like a Second Heartbeat*, prominently featured collaborations with several female vocalists such as the indie singer Bertie Blackman, Kira Piru, Okenyo, and MC and singer Sampa the Great. His album 'preview' show, as well as the official tour, demonstrated his inclusion of female artists. At these shows, two women were included in the five-strong 'Urthboy band' and most of the album's guest vocalists just listed, as well as Jane Tyrell, also joined Urthboy on stage for the songs that featured them (Urthboy "The Past"). At one of these shows Okenyo had a solo support slot (Urthboy, Okenyo, L-FRESH The Lion). Sikh male MC L-FRESH The Lion also played support at the official tour show that I attended, whose three-piece includes the female singer and MC Mirrah (Urthboy, Okenyo, L-FRESH The Lion). The finale of these shows included a throng of musicians on a small stage, and many of them were women (Urthboy "The Past"; (Urthboy, Okenyo, L-FRESH The Lion). For a White

Australian male MC's solo show, the support of female performers was palpable, and Urthboy was vocal about his admiration for each of them, as well as physically gesturing towards them, applauding them, giving them central space on stage and hugging each woman (Urthboy "The Past"; Urthboy, Okenyo, L-FRESH The Lion).

In this sense Urthboy 'walks the talk' of including and supporting artists other than fellow 'White boys', which is also apparent in his work signing female and non-White artists in his work as a label manager. Urthboy's visibility as a prominent conscious MC and the Elefant Traks label manager means that he is called to speak for Australian hip hop on such issues. He has been tagged in posts that highlight racism and sexism in Australian hip hop by South African-Australian performer Candy Bowers (Bowers). Bowers, and those who interact with her posts, have criticised Urthboy's position as 'the' go-to spokesperson about unequal representation in Australian hip hop. As phrased in one comment;

From now on wen he gets asked to do interviews on womens or black issues he shuld refer them to a woman or black person and shut the fuck up" [sic] (Lawson).

As a Black Australian woman, Candy Bowers reflected on the experience of being spoken for: "[s]ometimes I feel like my life is dominated by ... "liberal woke white men" like Urthboy. #gag" (Bowers). This highlights that Urthboy's position as a spokesperson for political issues within Australian hip hop is not used without contention. The success of his self-branding as a conscious MC and label manager in fact limits his political statements in this way, as he is the one called upon to speak about issues which affect marginalised artists (L-Fresh "Sexism"; Pulse Radio). This results in a form of 'mansplaining' and 'whitesplaining', that is, speaking for, and over, women and people of colour.

Another aspect of Urthboy's overtly political, public work is his work with charities and non-government organisations. He made a collaborative contribution to *The Key of*

Sea compilation album and performance (Urthboy and Group 120). This raised funds for projects that aimed to improve the treatment of refugees in Australia (The Key of Sea).⁵⁵ Another example of his political work beyond musical performance is the inclusion of his promotional photo in *The Wall of Hands* newspaper advertisement (Figure 25).



FIGURE 25. WALL OF HANDS ADVERTISEMENT (SYDNEY MORNING HERALD).

The *Wall of Hands* project aims “to close the Indigenous literacy gap” (Sydney Morning Herald). ‘Closing the gap’ has become a familiar phrase in Australia due to COAG (the Council of Australian Governments) taking up the challenge to overcome the difference between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians in life expectancy, mortality levels for children under five, and the attainment of literacy, writing and numeracy (Australian Human Rights Commission). These aims are based on UN Millenium

⁵⁵ According to *The Key Of Sea* cover booklet, “profits ... are donated to: The Asylum Seeker Resource Centre ... The Human Rights and Arts Film Festival ... [and] Refugees, Survivors and Ex-Detainees” (The Key of Sea).

Development Goals, yet the campaigns and projects to achieve these are ongoing, as the 'gap' has not been closed.

In this campaign, the use of a hand held to the camera signifies a wall of hands of concerned citizens, many of whom have a public profile, that is, a personal brand. This pose is one that Urthboy uses in a promotional artist photo, which is here re-used in this charity photo 'wall'. His open palm is bared to pledge a donation, and concern, towards the cause of improving Indigenous children's literacy in Australia. Yet the inclusion of Urthboy's photo also draws awareness to his logo, which is painted on his hand. While Urthboy is 'putting his hand up for' the cause of Indigenous literacy programs, this is also an instance of capitalising on a promotional opportunity by the inclusion of his artist photo, which coincidentally used the same pose.

In one sense this takes Urthboy's platform of representing others, or speaking out on causes through hip hop one step further, into a public pledge for a program 'on the ground'. His personal brand is associated with equality of opportunity for Indigenous people, which can include better educational outcomes. Urthboy raps in "To The Bank" from *The Signal*, "what I say, you can take it to the bank" (Urthboy "To The Bank"). Here he is performing a public political act. Yet, as with other forms of self-branding, but even more particularly in this example, the use of Urthboy's promotional artist photo returns attention to his personal brand. This reinforces the idea particular to the neoliberal era, that presenting a personal brand, even when acting politically, is important (Gershon 288). Urthboy did not, for example, perform this political action anonymously or uncoupled from his personal brand.

Urthboy's gaze and the act of holding a hand to the camera give this image a serious tone. However, as seen in his self-deprecating take on being a political artist in

“Modern Day Folk”, Urthboy does not always take his role seriously, as seen in his use of a White male Australian stereotype, the larrikin.

A Modern-Day Larrikin

Urthboy has demonstrated a reflexivity about being a White hip hop artist in Australia. He raps in “Fight Fire” from his 2009 album, *Spitshine*:

Sure I'm with The Herd but I ain't caught up in the politics of cattle
 You can push/ but don't think that you'll knock me off the saddle
 My job, my role, my love, is a black art form
 I'm a teacup that carried the storm (Urthboy feat. Nay and Mantra)

Carrying the “storm” of being a White male Australian hip hop artist in a “black art form” is given a specifically Australian slant by invoking the masculine stereotype of the larrikin. The qualities attributed to this larrikin identity are cheekiness, irreverence towards authority, and the distinct possibility of ‘bludging’⁵⁶ whenever possible⁵⁷. A predecessor of the larrikin is the bushman, a resourceful masculine stereotype that stemmed from the historical phenomenon of convict “bolters” who escaped from a life of forced labour to live in the Australian bush (Ward 146).

The term “larrikin” originated in the 1860s, when it was used to describe inner-city “street-youths given to anti-social hijinks, and often violent crime as well” (Bellanta “Leary Kin” 677). At this time, the term did not have positive associations, and was a “term of abuse” (Bellanta *Larrikins* 3). In the nineteenth century the “Anglo-Celtic” larrikins were the primary audience for blackface minstrelsy performance, and they (and Ned Kelly and his ‘bushranger’ siblings, heroes to the street larrikins) were described in terms of

⁵⁶ Australian English for avoiding work.

⁵⁷ Another quality put forward as Australian is a “maverick individualism and inventiveness” (Mitchell “Mapping Australian Music” 257). Yet being a maverick does not simply equate to being Australian, and, ironically enough, this continues a stereotype. It is also questionable if Australian hip hop has been, on the whole, musically inventive.

blackness (Bellanta "Leary Kin" 677-9). Being associated with blackness was not a passive process however, but one that "larrikins embraced ... turning it into a defiantly positive form of identification (Bellanta "Leary Kin" 681). This has some parallel with the way that young men in Western Sydney responded to the import of hip hop and the oppositional masculinity that participating in hip hop afforded them (Maxwell). The larrikin figure went on to feature in Australian cinema, seen in characters described as "working-class, brash, iconic, egalitarian, outspoken and macho" (Gottschall 863).

Urthboy's larrikin persona is expressed in live performance through his playful approach to hip hop traditions. For example, Urthboy stacked multiple hats on his head at a The Herd show, because "hip hop's all about the hats", and took audience votes as to which one to wear (Elefant Traks "The Herd"). Urthboy dressed as a pirate at both his solo show at the vaudevillian Spiegeltent that was parked in the forecourt at the Sydney Opera House (Sydney Opera House), and the Elefant Traks 10th Anniversary Party (Elefant Traks "Elefant Traks 10th Anniversary Party"). His costume was complete with feathered hat, walking stick, stockings, shoes, breeches, and jacket. Alongside him Jane Tyrrell's Victorian dress complete with corset and hooped skirt made for a comic, absurdist edge to a contemporary hip hop show. This was a larrikin's take that mocked the seriousness of proving hip hop credentials, much as the original larrikins enjoyed watching the blackface caricatures of "dandies" (Bellanta "Leary Kin" 677-9).

Urthboy also plays directly with the staple elements of hip hop style, such as the double layer of hoods and body paint seen in his promotional photo (Figure 26).



FIGURE 26. URTHBOY PROMOTIONAL IMAGE (URTHBOY.COM).

An early track from his 2004 debut solo album, titled “No Rider”, also captures a playful and self deprecating tone in his description of the the endeavour to ‘be an MC’:

I was workin’ as an MC the other day
 With a cup of instant coffee and some marmalade
 It’s hard to play when you just wanna run away
 It’s under laid since under-age

Then the phone rang, “It’s Urthboy here
 I’m Elefant Traks just like Kenny Sabir”,
 “Hi, someone led me to believe that you MC
 I’ve got an offer that would maybe even tempt me

What I meant means we give you a set fee
 You play at our gig for peanuts and a little prestige
 Ah, so the rest see me as a success
 But I’m struggling to pay rent with records to press

But yet I agree to it, how could you not?
 Thinking of the fluid with the international slot
 I got no time for rhymers slash social climbers
 It’s just another gig I’m doin’ for the rider

The track tells the story of being an independent, young artist trying to make a living, surviving on “instant coffee and marmalade”. He contradicts himself by “thinking of ... the international slot” yet having “no time for rhymers slash social climbers”, although a self-deprecating tone remains. Using an Australian accent and phrases such as “the fluid” (alcohol), and being “broke by night end” appeal to the mythology of youth as a time for

fun, irresponsible, alcohol-fuelled nights out with friends. Although stylistically a long way from the beer advertisements of the 1970s and 1980s, here the echo of the “religious trinity of masculinity, nationalism, and beer” is still discernible (Kirkby 253). Urthboy invokes an Australian “imagined community” that seems to have progressed politically from the Australia of the 1970s and 1980s, yet shares essential features (Anderson).

After detailing the struggle of sound-checking with a sound person more accustomed to rock outfits, Urthboy admits that he does gigs for the “rider”, even though there turns out to be none. This is similar to the slapstick presented in the “BBQ Song” at Mass MC’s expense. This comic tale places Urthboy in Australia as a young MC who deals with hostile city conditions as he tries to “tame the peak hour crush to the venue”. He also makes fun of the fact that dealing with the sound person, and managing himself as a young independent artist is not at all glamorous. The track tells the story of an Australian MC who encounters the perils of working in venues more accustomed to Australian rock acts, yet who has fun even when he faces the difficulties of “working as an MC”.

Urthboy performs a pun on his title, “ok Winona, I’ll do it for the rider” (Urthboy “No Rider”). The joke on a ‘lame’ celebrity such as Winona Ryder is echoed when he jokingly raps in The Herd track, “We Can’t Hear You”, “I’ll bootleg my sex tape with Delta Goodrem” (The Herd “We Can’t Hear You”). This kind of joke relies on an opposition between Urthboy as a conscious MC standing for underground and authentic music, and Delta Goodrem (an Australian pop singer) standing for mainstream pop music. This is the repetition of a sort of metonymy between a ‘masculine’ music standing for authenticity and ‘feminine’ pop music standing for artificiality (Coates 52). These joking lines use a sexist dichotomy which counteracts Urthboy’s later work to valorise female artists.

A joking attitude is also found in Urthboy's MCing movement style. The "hypermasculine" movement style attributed to commercial hip hop and gangsta rap is marked by these gestures being forceful and muscular, together with a scowling, angry or tough demeanour (Danesi; Lewis; Majors and Bilson). Urthboy's gestures and movement are not like this, which suggests that he does not claim a stereotypical form of masculine embodiment as a hip hop artist. His onstage movement consists of him 'rocking the crowd' (which was, after all, one of the first functions of MCs during hip hop's genesis). "We Get Around" is an example of a celebratory, anthemic party track of Urthboy's where he cues his audience to jump to the beat, wave their arms, and shout the lyrics. He appears to enjoy the role of 'conducting the energy of the crowd', self-mockingly taking the role of a conductor. At other times, with Jane Tyrell, he has employed the technique of waiting until the last possible second before sprinting on stage suddenly to announce his entrance at the beginning of a show (Urthboy et al). These examples demonstrate his playful attitude to the role of MC.

Urthboy has also displayed a wry humour about the process of producing a hip hop track, heard in his comment, "shit, you mean hip hop's songwriting?" (Song Summit). In this comment he is sarcastic about the lack of recognition that Australian hip hop has received as being 'serious songwriting' that requires work, and that it should be rewarded as such by awards shows. At the same time, this is a cheeky statement that is somewhat self-deprecating and so congruent with not being a 'tall poppy'.

Another self-reflexive, cheeky take on being an MC is seen in Urthboy's cover art for *Spitshine* (Figure 27).



FIGURE 27. SPITSHINE COVER ART (URTHBOY "SPITSHINE COVER").

The word 'spitshine' suggests polishing leather military boots, but this cover art presents a sneaker. This suggests that hip hop streetwear is Urthboy's uniform, and therefore, that he is dedicated to the form. Here the stylised, somewhat Japanese-typographic "U", reminiscent of Wu-Tang Clan's, is placed where the Nike, Adidas or Puma logos would be. 'Walking in Urthboy's shoes' is also implied. A shoe is a personal object, yet the clean, minimalist design of this is almost impersonal and mass-produced, stripped of identifiers: bar Urthboy's 'U' logo. Urthboy's imagined, branded sneaker is a meta comment on presenting a personal MC brand. It suggests that listeners can 'buy into' the Urthboy brand much as consumers 'buy into' Adidas or other streetwear labels and fetishise them by collecting sneakers or tending to their image-based blogs (underratedco).

This image goes further than Run DMC and Adidas' cross-branding: it suggests that Urthboy walks in the shoes that also push forward his brand. This suggests that this album is 'him', but it is also his self packaged into a branded form, as the sneaker is. The reverse side of the printed cover booklet shows the same sneaker now dirty and scuffed, like Urthboy himself sometimes is (he has joked about being injured when hyping the crowd). This cover art uses the ideo of a rough-and-tumble larrikin physicality while referring to the very process of self-branding.

The mix of some levity and self-deprecation in the allegiance to hip hop seen in this cover art is a larrikin take on the business of presenting an MC brand. In a similar way he has referred to a historically prominent sign of a hip hop enthusiast, baggy jeans, whilst also describing them as a comfortable part of his lived everyday experience:

Now you wonder why I wear the baggy sides—
That's room to move
See I kept it baggy while the world gone skin-tight
If I hold it in I'm holding out the insight (Urthboy feat. Lior)

The Ironic Stubbie

Urthboy's use of the joking larrikin stereotype is particularly on display in his choice of what objects will be used to build his personal brand. Consider in this context Urthboy's 'stubbie'⁵⁸ holder (Figure 28).



FIGURE 28. URTHBOY STUBBIE HOLDER. PHOTOGRAPH BY PEDRO ALTUNA.

⁵⁸ A short bottle of beer.

Used to keep a beer cold, stubbie holders reference both masculine and national stereotypes. Beer drinking, and keeping beer cool in the Australian summer has given the stubbie holder a central place in Australian culture. It calls to mind summer, cricket, and football—all of the clichés of Australian life—and, of course, beer, a central prop of performing (particularly White) masculinity in Australia. In the 1960s,

[w]ith the new technology and packaging of beer in cans, advertising began targeting young men as the masculinity of beer drinking came to be associated with beer's portability—specifically cans (or bottles, called stubbies) individually held, able to be taken in the Esky cooler to the beach and sporting events (Kirkby 247).

Urthboy's stubbie holder, made of waterproof, insulating 'wetsuit' material, points to his adoption of a larrikin persona, because it is a cheeky thing to brand a beer-drinking accessory. The cultural in-joke of printing a professionally-designed, contemporary hip hop logo on a stubbie holder is that it reclaims the object from the cringe-worthy "ocker chic" period of the 1970s and 1980s (Thomas 50). Branding a stubbie holder suggests a connection to the mythology of the 'larrikin' alcoholic antics cricketers of this period such as Merv Hughes and David Boon (White). Printing a stubbie holder with a hip hop MC's logo presents a generational update on a prop of stereotypical Australian masculinity—yet getting the stubbie holder printed and offering it for sale as 'merch' is itself in keeping with larrikin humour. Referring to an iconic masculinity, such as the sports-loving beer drinker while *seeming* to undercut it with a hip hop update, is described as a form of "ironizing" by Korobov:

While masculinity can be constructed to appear stable, stereotypically monolithic, and thus normatively powerful, these same stereotypical positions can easily become "ironized" to index other forms of masculinity that (at a second level of irony) do not necessarily sacrifice their power or persuasiveness (226–7).

This is also seen in the display of masculinity in the *Home Grown* cover, and the "BBQ Song", where "ironizing" the stereotypical masculinity of, for example 'the tough DJ'

(in the suburbs doing some gardening) or the ‘rapper’ (at a dismal ‘hip hop barbeque’) in fact keeps the “power and persuasiveness” of the new masculinity that is presented intact. The result of this “ironizing” is that the new masculinity is presented as being acceptable because it seems to be knowingly aware of the monolithic stereotype.

The jokey stubbie holder again highlights the tension between the hip hop imperative of individuals ‘big-noting’ and pushing forward a personal brand with the Australian “tall-poppy syndrome” response to perceived arrogance that is deemed excessive (Peeters). Being able to fall back on the defence of ‘I was only joking’, seen in this merchandise, keeps some self-deprecation as a part of the connotations of this object, which can be a way to avoid the criticism of being a ‘tall poppy’.

The logotype font, which is repeated elsewhere on the *Spitshine* album design (painted on Urthboy’s hand in Figure 26 and appearing again in the Urthboy branded sneaker, Figure 27) are reminiscent of the font used by Wu Tang Clan in their iconic logo (Mao and Sen). Wu Tang Clan often used a yellow ‘W’ against a black background, to which Urthboy’s object adds a phrase in white, “She’ll be fine”. Urthboy ‘signifies’ on the logo of the Wu Tang Clan ‘W’ in his ‘U’. Various members of the ‘Clan’ reconfigured the ‘W’ to form other letters, which they used in logos of their own names in their solo releases (Mao and Sen). By using this design Urthboy is presenting himself as a fellow hip hop artist, but also as a fan who displays his respect for canonical hip hop figures. This also reinforces the place of male figures (who need to be continually honoured) at the centre of hip hop history.

The white tag line on this object, “She’ll be fine”, reinforces a laconic, ‘no-worries’ cadence that is stereotypically associated with the ‘Australian character’. Yet, the phrase is also a specific take on the hip hop imperative to hustle. Yes, it implies, ‘spitshine’, that

is, work and some polish, will be required, but be relaxed about it, and fit into the dominant Australian masculinity.

Hip hop's relationship with commodity culture, memorably triggered by Run DMC and Adidas, is in this example enacted by an independent Australian MC. This is not cross-branding, as it is not a collaboration with a beer company (or a stubbie holder company⁵⁹). The only brand being advanced is Urthboy's, by using aspects of a national identity and its masculine larrikin stereotype. This furthers Urthboy's brand of being an independent Australian voice, yet it also keeps some problematic aspects of nationalism visible, namely the idea that White men are *the* ideal Australians.

Urthboy's stubbie holder and its careful navigation of Black hip hop and Australian cultural meanings is an example of the sophistication of self-branding. The stubbie holder is a novel form of merchandise. It is not 'only' the commonplace t-shirt used to display an individual's fandom of a musician. The pragmatic value of this object suggests a certain play with the very practice of a musician offering merchandise. The stubbie holder materialises Urthboy's personal brand in its owner's everyday life, as they use it and proclaim some connection with him. The choice to brand and sell this object suggests that some Urthboy fans will occupy the identity position of being beer drinkers. If used for social drinking, Urthboy's brand is literally placed in the physical space (in a thick font) between people who are having a conversation. This branded object reinforces stereotypes of White Australian masculinity and the normalisation of drinking in Australian culture, while also presenting a hip hop reference. For these reasons, considering an artist such as Urthboy and whether they express political critique needs to take account of the everyday objects that carry their logo.

⁵⁹ No details of manufacture are on this object.

War from Afar

Several tracks by Urthboy deal with themes of violence. His album, *A Distant Sense of Random Menace*, features a track of the same name (Figure 29).

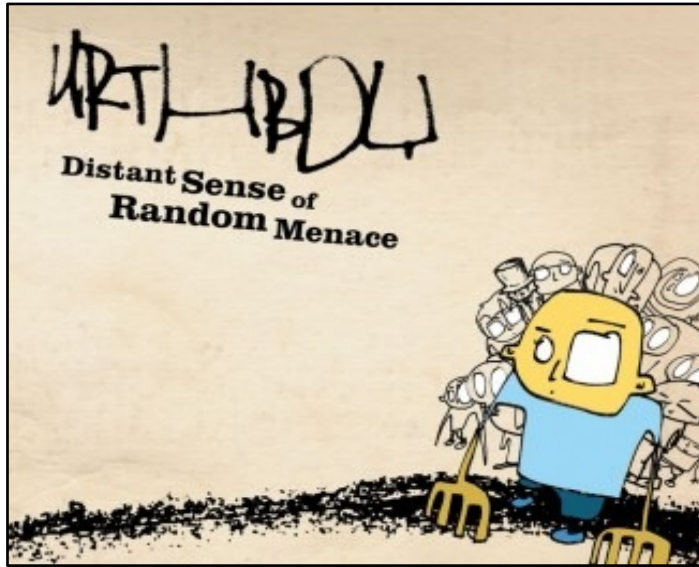


FIGURE 29. DISTANT SENSE OF RANDOM MENACE COVER ART.

In this cover art the lettering of Urthboy's name suggests graffiti tagging, but with a naïve, childlike style. The different-sized eyes in the central figure, who is implied to be Urthboy, are echoed by the blank eyes behind him. They appear spell bound, but also fearful. These elements of the cover, the album title and the track of the same name provide a message that government and media representations of war produce a disabling fear and apathy in the public.

In the title track Urthboy raps of this dislocating effect of hearing about distant wars in contemporary media. In the chorus, which actually opens the track, backing singers cite the names of places around the world affected by war.

Come one, come all, join in this ...
It's just ...

Vietnam ... a distant sense of random menace

You know, it's out there ...

Tehran ...

Watch out for them randoms ...

Maybe it's too complicated, maybe it's a minefield
 maybe it's like someone else's problem it's not quite real
 buried page ten of today's paper
 read about another road rage of a crazed teenager

The mother gives the vox grab, saying she's just sad,
 and all the justice in the world won't bring her daughter back
 flavour of the forty-eight hours 'til the news finds another
 utter tragedy to increase the views

The track describes a detached foggiess induced by the portrayal of violence elsewhere. Urthboy raps in the opening verse of a “road rage of a crazed teenager”, but even this incident is just “another” one. This violence may occur close to home, but it is only “another” instance of rage. He describes the repetitive and numbing effect of consuming news reports of violent incidents. A crazed teenager is a striking description, but even this “may” be kept at a distance by a news consumer, and designated a “minefield”, “too complicated”, or “someone else’s problem, it’s not quite real”. In the second verse, the mother’s grief and “utter tragedy” are placed in the context of a “vox grab” and a short news cycle, suggesting that ‘grabbing’ her misuses her emotion.

And you still never know if you've reached the truth
 thirty-seconds-to-a-minute and you're in it up to the tips of your toes
 and the truth can be a dodgy uncle
 media moguls and leaders act like Simon and Garfunkel

The third verse makes clear Urthboy’s distrust of the media as a source of ‘truth’, a mistrust that seems to extend to a previous generation’s protest music, such as the folk artists Simon and Garfunkel, who were perceived as presenting a more moderate and gentle form of political opposition than other acts from the sixties (Eder). Urthboy has a wry tone when delivering this reference. Pointing to famous names and popular cultural references in a rap conventionally receives a response, which may be the listener’s laugh, low whistle, or head nod. Being delivered at the end of a line of rap is also a rhythmic

convention and a way to draw attention to the reference. The idea is reiterated at the same place in the next verse, where the phrase “token olive leaves” gestures again to empty messages of reconciliation, and the phrase is underscored by also fulfilling the rhyme of the line before. This highlights the implied generational and ideological differences between Urthboy and Simon and Garfunkel.

The verse declares the scepticism of the rapper towards both left and right wing commentary, and in the following verse Urthboy personalizes his response in an effort to collapse the distance between himself and the ‘random menace’.

The, right wing squawks for yet more hawks
 And the left wing calls for yet more peace talks
 And many people left are asking who to believe
 ‘cos reality is as muddy as token olive leaves

And apparently you can’t wear your heart on your sleeve
 ‘cos the menace is too distant for listeners to grieve
 and even, umm, I’ve been numbed to the cartoon alternative
 just tryin’ to learn to live, it’s like:

Urthboy admits that, “umm, even I’ve been numbed to the cartoon alternative”. The “umm” suggests a self-deprecating, yet honest, moment of Urthboy admitting that he is also susceptible to what he is critiquing. This places him in the context of mediated versions of war, or “cartoon alternatives” to the real thing as he is also at a distance from where they occur. Urthboy does seem like he is wearing his “heart on his sleeve”, as his admission represents a moment of emotional vulnerability. This correlates with a study which found that Australian men of Urthboy’s age may be more likely to discuss emotion than those of preceding generations (Butera). These moments of vulnerability, also heard in “tragedy”, “grieve”, and “heart”, are surrounded by descriptions of the dissociative effects of media. There are five verses of this before the chorus. This serves to reinforce the repetitious, numbing nature of constant news of war.

[Chorus]

Kigali ... It's just a distant sense of random menace
 Chechnya ... It's just a distant sense of random menace
 Lebanon ... It's just a distant sense of random menace
 Woomera⁶⁰ ... It's just a distant sense of random menace

The vulnerable or emotional undercurrent hinted at is then brought to the surface in the chorus, which is sung by several voices, rather than only the one rapping voice of the verses. The chorus swells in volume and the phrasing of the 'distant' places is *legato*, or long and smooth. These names are also stretched to be half the speed of the rapped verses, which suggests a ceremonial chanting to remember these places of war. The effect is that of the singers (and by implication, Urthboy) perform a memorial for the masses of people that they can imagine, but never be close to. Urthboy's rapped rhythm answers each name, reframing each of them as just a "distant sense of random menace".

Try as I might I cannot get my head around the
 Hutus slaughtering the Tutsis in Rwanda one-nine-nine-four,
 and then on top to comprehend how the United Nations
 let it happen with their blue helmets armed by the door

In this next verse Urthboy focuses on genocide in Rwanda. This track was released in 2004, ten years after the genocide. This is a powerful example of Urthboy wrestling to comprehend this scale of violence, made more striking by his use of the first person. The number of people killed is incomprehensible, yet ten years later, Urthboy is still haunted by them. This is the only geographical place that Urthboy mentions in the rapped verses themselves, which serves to single out Rwanda's genocide as an especially painful subject. Coming after the sonically swollen chorus, the singers suddenly drop out at the beginning of this verse. This makes Urthboy's voice prominent over a simple beat (with bass, guitars, and sound effects further back in the mix). Similarly, the beginning of the

⁶⁰ Woomera is the one place that is in Australia, yet it is also characterised as distant due to the way it is presented in the media. This emphasises that the effects of rocket-testing on the Indigenous community in Woomera in 'remote' Australia can also seem distant to the urban news consumer.

next verse stands out, which highlights the way that these statistics of violent deaths can be hard to comprehend.

Eight hundred thousand in less than ninety days,
is Africa just too far away?
Or is the genocide convention only mentioned in connection
with the Nazis and the Jews during World War Two?

‘Cos your world views seen through the same few that drew
their bloody colonial maps for custodial taxes
historical pacts, treaties and age-old arrangements ignored
in order for the dominant order to be restored

Warlords, dictators, puppet regimes installed
while cold wars and old walls did fall
wars on drugs, wars on terror later on there’ll be
concessions made by governments of intelligence errors

Is to understand to simplify? Black and white, good and bad,
learn not to sympathise unless it’s of an allied flag
I’ll be damned if my land is the fifty-first state
both a realist and idealist on the same day, like:

These verses refer to historical causes of war such as “custodial taxes”, “bloody colonial maps”, “warlords”, and “dictators”. Importantly, ‘the West’ doesn’t escape responsibility here, either in the reference to the “United Nations” or the (former) colonial powers. Rapping of “concessions made by governments of intelligence errors” and an “allied flag” refers to the entry into the Iraq War in 2003. These general references create an effect of an educated media consumer aware of complex causes of war, yet the generality of these creates a sense of being overwhelmed with information about these faraway conflicts.

In the final lines before the next chorus, Urthboy raps that he will be “damned if my land will become a fifty-first state”, and that he is both a “realist and idealist on the same day”. “I’ll be damned”, is rapped in a strong Australian accent, which gives a hint of the patriotism associated with the anti-American sentiment. Here Urthboy says “his land”, an idea countered by later tracks where his acknowledgement of Indigenous people and their histories suggests that he wouldn’t make this statement (Urthboy “Impossible Story”).

These lines suggest his alliance with the protests against Australia following the United States (and Britain) into Iraq in 2003. These protests drew significant numbers in Australia: the first round of marches brought out an estimated 200,00 - 500,000 people in Sydney and was connected to worldwide marches protesting this intervention (Fairfax Media). However, Prime Minister John Howard accepted the ‘intelligence’ and rhetoric of George W. Bush and Tony Blair, and Australian forces did indeed enter the war. The idealism that can be triggered by joining a protest is matched by Urthboy’s realism about the ability of governments to override and ignore such protests.

[Chorus]

Vietnam ... It’s just a distant sense of random menace

Sierra Leone ... It’s just a distant sense of random menace

Zimbabwe ... It’s just a distant sense of random menace

Bosnia ... It’s just a distant sense of random menace

The repetition of this chorus to the picture of war being ongoing, as the chanted names occur in a repetitive cycle.

In the following verses Urthboy explains that the issues of war were present for him “before hip hop was either barbeque or bling”—that is, before the debates over whether Australian hip hop is homegrown or an American import.

It’s not a soapbox, or at least I hope not
these are things that affect me so much they’re what I dream of
dream of different endings where lessons are learnt
before good and bad were copyright foreign policy terms

Before hip hop was either barbeque or bling
before it seemed like everyone was operated by string
so align yourself, define yourself, design yourself,
with any luck your life will all work out

The critique of hip hop is extended to the potential outcomes of self-branding, an exaggerated self-involvement: “so align yourself, define yourself, design yourself/with any luck your life will all work out”. Urthboy comments on the pressure to align himself with a style of hip hop in order for his life, or his career, to “all work out”. He has a cynical tone

about this mode of being as he contrasts these self-interested concerns in the next verse with the shift to “ethnically cleanse”, and “rape, pillage and killing”:

And you won't find yourself the victim of an effort to ethnically cleanse
left to defend the rest of these men, women
and children, from rape, pillage and killing
'cos every evil got its coalition of the goddamn willing

so forgive me if I can't give you something to laugh to
this is for you to argue, shake your mind and arse to,
it's for me to ask you just who can you trust
dust to dust, and if tomorrow is us? ...

What if tomorrow is us? (What if)
Cos you know that tomorrow is us
And what if tomorrow is us?

This jolt produced by the sudden return to descriptions of mass violence, looting, and death, serves to make the concerns about an individual's life “all work[ing] out” seem shallow, but also as a part of the reaction to passively receiving news of war from afar. Urthboy refuses the larrikin stereotype in the line, “forgive me if I can't give you something to laugh to”, which suggests a moment of self-awareness about tackling a heavy topic. The meta description of the track as something to “argue, shake your arse and mind to” reflects the conscious hip hop imperative to provide a beat that induces physical movement while also inspiring minds to critically reflect on political themes. This track does not inspire dance, however, and in live performance venues, audience members nod their heads while listening instead. In this sense it is more mind, than arse, shaking.

Urthboy lays out the crux of the track in his final lines of these verses, which put rhetorical questions to the listener about who they can trust, and “what if tomorrow it's us?” Here the pronoun “us” suggests solidarity and a coalition of listeners who are opposed to those who can't be trusted.

[Chorus]
Kashmir ... It's just a distant sense of random menace
Guam ... It's just a distant sense of random menace
Kabul ... It's just a distant sense of random menace

San Salvador ... It's just a distant sense of random menace
 Gaza Strip ... It's just a distant sense of random menace
 East Timor ... It's just a distant sense of random menace
 Kigali ... It's just a distant sense of random menace
 Chechnya ... It's just a distant sense of random menace
 Lebanon ... It's just a distant sense of random menace
 Woomera ... It's just a distant sense of random menace
 Vietnam ... It's just a distant sense of random menace
 Sierra Leone ... It's just a distant sense of random menace
 Zimbabwe ... It's just a distant sense of random menace
 Bosnia ... It's just a distant sense of random menace

This extended chorus combines the previous ones, with a longer list of places included. This creates space for the listener to reflect on Urthboy's lyrics and the repetition of the idea of "it's just a distant sense of random menace" with the invitation to be empathetic and imagine all of the places listed that are affected by war, instead of "us".

This track does not offer an answer to war. It refers to macro political forces as well as the interpersonal violence of rape. Neither of these kinds of references are vivid or detailed. Instead, listing place names and information about war produces a sense of the struggle to comprehend reported violence and to truly understand what it *would be* like when it is "us". The track prompts a realistic reflection on the self-centred response that these media reports of war can induce; a turning of one's back on the distant problems of others to focus on oneself. Urthboy includes himself as being guilty of such a response.

His signification on the hip hop theme of violence is far from talk of the experience of drug dealing or ghetto living: it is an abstracted "mind shaking" in response to news from elsewhere. Around these lyrics is the music, which provide a mournful and haunting atmosphere. In particular, the rhythm guitar strummed in a descending pattern in a minor tonality and a high pitched guitar line which uses tremolo in a descending pattern reinforce the descending step-wise movement of the sung place-names in the chorus. This

produces a sad, reflective affect in the listener, so that in combination, the track impacts upon the 'heart' and the "mind".

Urthboy's approach to war has a contradictory relationship with the digger figure. The digger figure built on the previous "nineteenth-century notions of the ideal Australian 'type'—the bushman and the city-bush dichotomy is widely recognised as the foundation of Australian cultural consciousness" (Seal 3). The digger was a construct of media and government propaganda sources that described Australian soldiers in World War I, and, like the bushman and the larrikin, became naturalised in Australian culture. The connotations of a digger are a humble soldier and not an officer, as the term was used to describe the Australian soldiers that were led to their deaths by British officers in Gallipoli. The digger is described as "a temporary bearer of arms and uneasy wearer of uniforms. He is 'an ordinary bloke' doing a job of work for a reasonable day's pay" (Seal 3). A digger is an ostensibly egalitarian figure whose experience of mateship with other soldiers is his defining social relationship. While Urthboy's lyrics critique war in the 'random distance', some traits of the digger, a war figure, were drawn on in The Herd's cover version of "I Was Only Nineteen" (The Herd "I Was Only Nineteen").

In this cover version, Urthboy's serious reflective approach to war in tracks such as *Distant Sense of Random Menace* is contrasted with a more conventional attitude to soldiers in Australian culture. The original song by Redgum was a folk song from the Vietnam era and it worked to provide a vehicle for including Australians in the predominantly American narrative of the Vietnam war. Redgum themselves used a larrikin role by turning folk to left-nationalist and pop modes, while also mocking previous nationalist balladry. The lyrics of "I Was Only Nineteen" refer to what would now be called post traumatic stress disorder suffered by soldiers in the aftermath of war. At the time of

Redgum's original, this marked a shift from the previous emphasis on the digger figure as stoic, heard in the lyrics,

The Anzac legend neglected to mention
 The mud, the fear, the blood, the tears, the tension
 Dad's recollection beyond comprehension
 Didn't seem quite real until we were sent in
 The chaos and confusion, the fire and steel
 I had shrapnel in my back I didn't even feel

It is also, importantly, a song that makes the tragedy of fellow soldiers' death central to the experience of war, as heard in the black humour of the lines, "Frankie kicked a mine⁶¹ the day that mankind kicked the moon/God help me, he was going home in June".

The Herd originally recorded the track for the national youth radio station produced by the Australian Broadcasting Corporation, Triple J, as a part of its long running show, *Like A Version*, in which contemporary artists perform covers, which builds anticipation as to the 'spin' the artists will place on the original. At live performances of this track many audience members recite the lyrics that detail paranoia caused by the Vietnam War—while jumping around and enjoying the experience of being a part of a contemporary hip hop show. At the performances I attended, some young men in the audience stood still with their fist upraised, as though paying homage to Vietnam veterans and fallen soldiers. The attitude of the Herd is usually equally solemn, although the song is launched into as a 'sing-along' by performers and audience alike, as if all of those present are performing a Redgum karaoke. At every performance The Herd pay their "full respects" to songwriter John Schumann, who has joined them in the song and apparently "given them his blessing", as though a torch of folk singing had been passed (Elefant Traks "Elefant Traks 10th Anniversary Party"; Last Kinection, Horrorshow and The Herd; Elefant Traks "The Herd").

⁶¹ Landmine.

The Herd's hip hop cover adds electronically produced beats, rhythm guitar, and accordion to this classic Australian folk song. The lyrics are the same as the original, but instead of the distinctive lone voice and broad Australian accent of John Schumann, the lyrics are shared by the male MCs Ozi Batla and Urthboy (and originally, Berzerkatron). Since singer Jane Tyrell has joined The Herd, female vocal harmony reinforces some parts of the verses and the chorus. However, even with these instrumental and vocal additions to the cover version—The Herd's 'spin'—"I Was Only Nineteen" is a track that highlights the Australian male voice and reflects on a masculine world.

The music video produced for the Herd's cover version reinforces the stereotypically Australian masculinity of this perspective on war (8mexta). A grave performance by the central actor shows a man having flashbacks and dreams related to his past in Vietnam. While suggesting deep grief and trauma, the frame of reference of the song (and the music video for the Herd version) is returned soldiers looking back at their younger selves; Vietnam veterans literally look back at a screen to watch actors playing their younger selves in the music video (8mexta). The song also centres on veterans' memories of their dead mates, which they consider with sorrow and bewilderment. In these ways the song reifies the figure of a young (nineteen-year-old) Australian soldier and the tragedy that befalls him, whether he is killed in battle or returns to Australia to be haunted by it.

The sense of being, at heart, a good 'bloke' who was unaware of the reality of war that was about to hit him is not so different to the emphasis that diggers were not "professional soldiers" (Seal 3). "I Was Only Nineteen" does not criticise conscription or valorise those who objected to the war: in this sense the politics it performs are not critical. The track also keeps the emphasis on a homosocial world made up of men that is a part of "digger lore" central to the song of the Vietnam era, and which is then repeated by The

Herd in the present (Seal 3). At live performances by The Herd, the sense of a politically progressive band being outspoken about current issues is interrupted by this song, which fits into the social convention of glorifying Australian soldiers, and can suddenly make me, as a woman, feel excluded from the myth that the narrative that is being performed as quintessentially Australian (Elefant Traks “Elefant Traks 10th Anniversary Party”; Last Kinection, Horrorshow and The Herd; Elefant Traks “The Herd”).

In “A Distant Sense of Random Menace” Urthboy critiques and laments media portrayal of faraway wars. Other tracks of his also critique war “always and everywhere” (urthboy “765 Hours”). The Herd also express compassion for refugees from war and the cynical media use of asylum seekers in distress on The Tampa (The Herd “0.77”). Performing these tracks suggests that Urthboy is pacifist and critical of state-sanctioned violence, and of the media and governmental portrayal of war in a domestic political context. However, the inclusion of “I Was Only Nineteen” as a staple of The Herd’s set list, together with the dynamics of its live performance, helps to reinforce a male-centred myth of war. Some depictions of the Vietnam War (such as Redgum’s original song) emphasised the profound psychological effects that the war had on Australian soldiers, which destabilised the notion of the digger figure as stoic. Yet rehashing this song in the present keeps men central in the narrative of war, whose primary frame of reference is homosocial, always bouncing between “a select circle of mates” (Kirkby 248). In this way Urthboy’s personal brand benefits from using these resources of national and gender identity and reviving them for a new generation to sing along to. The potential for political critique about state-sanctioned violence is limited by recycling these myths of exclusion.

Conclusion

Urthboy is an MC who can be classed as socially 'conscious' due to some of his lyrics, and his role as label manager, supporter and mentor to young, female, and non-White artists. Urthboy's collaboration with, and support of, female and Indigenous artists is demonstrated in interviews, label signings, tracks, shows and videos (Elefant Traks "elefanttraks.com"), although his role as a spokesperson on diversity is rightly open to the criticism of speaking for others (Bowers).

Urthboy 'represents' an Australian place ("inner West, outer West, stay fresh"), national issues (the treatment of asylum seekers), uses an Australian accent and slang ("broke as hell"), and is seen as being emblematic of Australian hip hop (Pulse Radio). Urthboy is White, but does not produce 'barbeque hop', as the Southern Cross constellation and national colours of the *Home Grown* compilation cover are rejected in his work. Indeed, Urthboy deplores the situation of living in a town of "flag-waving Blinky Bills⁶²" (Urthboy "Hold Court").

His branded stubbie holder keeps his brand congruent with a stereotypical White Australian masculinity, while presenting the object as an ironic reference to a monolithic stereotype. He works with the theme of violence, common to both the explicitly masculine hip hop canon and the digger stereotype of White Australian masculinity. He benefits from a conventional patriotic respect for Australia's involvement in war yet he also raps about the dislocating effect of media reports on faraway wars. This is a contradiction that undercuts the politically critical message of "Distant Sense of Random Menace", as "I Was Only Nineteen" aligns with a cultural practice of glorifying Australian soldiers.

⁶²A koala character, Blinky Bill featured in children's books from the 1930s, and has featured in many adaptations, such as a children's television show that aired in Australia during Urthboy's childhood. He is associated with a White Australian identity.

An MC who works with conscious genre resources, Urthboy is nevertheless realistic about political change. Instead of worrying about hip hop authenticity or “keep[ing] it real”, Urthboy claims he seeks to “keep it relevant”, suggesting that political realities are his primary concern (Urthboy “Keep It Relevant”). Yet, he isn’t grandiose about the impact of ‘conscious’ music, as fellow Herd member Jane Tyrell sings, even at the symbolic execution of a “king”, there are “no rose-petalled glasses” (The Herd “The King Is Dead”). He may be a “modern-day folk singer”, but he is clear that this is not a role that is only powered by optimism (Urthboy “Modern Day Folk”). Indeed, the political overthrow of the ‘king’ (former Prime Minister John Howard) wasn’t the end of the political system that supported him, or the issues that The Herd spoke about, such as the government’s treatment of asylum seekers. The Herd’s landmark conscious track, “0.77”, and its youthful fury at the plight of asylum seekers, continues to resonate with Urthboy’s personal brand as a political critic.

If a future politician looked like Urthboy, he would have benefited from being a White ‘boy’ in the male-dominated field of Australian hip hop, even as he is aware that he could “never tell you the impossible story” of others’ suffering (Urthboy “Impossible Story”). This shows that he wrestles with the role of being a politically ‘conscious’ MC. This is heard in a track that he shares with other Elefant Traks artists, titled “On Your Shoulders” (Urthboy feat. Solo and Jimblah). The chorus, which includes backing vocals from Indigenous MC Jimblah and Jane Tyrell, is:

You can carry it all on your shoulders
 Like you’re the only one to resolve it
 Let’s just try to be, to be, to be (Urthboy feat. Solo and Jimblah)

The question of how to “just ... be” is complicated by being a White Australian MC. The self-awareness this produces has a playful outlet for Urthboy, as he is self-deprecating about there being a correct way to ‘be hip hop’. He plays with his hip hop

embodiment and costume, seen in the cover art of a sneaker for the *Spitshine* album, his promotional photos and onstage ensembles (Sydney Opera House). He also celebrates and jokes about the life of a touring musician, heard in the larrikin-esque “No Rider” and “We Get Around”. Merchandise associated with Urthboy has included an Urthboy-branded stubbie holder and an Elephant Traks baby onesie (at the time of writing Elephant Traks merchandise also includes drinks coasters).

The collectivity and diversity of The Herd and Elephant Traks suggests a progressive political agenda. However, even in his role as a label manager working to benefit other artists, Urthboy’s personal brand has benefited from being a leading Australian hip hop figure. In these ways the work of being a conscious MC and label manager is entwined with the imperative to self-fashion. The capitalisation on resources of the self, as critiqued in gangsta rappers, is evident also in those of the conscious variety. This is another example of a lack of demarcation between conscious and gangsta genres. This also shows that presenting a personal brand in a neoliberal reinforces the idea that this process needs to be undertaken for succeed in both work and leisure interests (Gershon 288).

Both The Herd and Elephant Traks are also fronted by brands. The associations with these brands includes a herd of elephants, a wild political mass of people, a family of artists based around politics and music, and a group of people who progressed from a youthful compilation project to the formalising of a record label that represents multiple artists and their licensing (headed by a single manager) (Elephant Traks “Elephant Traks”).

The Elephant Traks branding suggests that Urthboy, The Herd, Elephant Traks performers and their audiences are a part of a politically critical “fam ... all across the land”, even if they make up the ‘23%’ (or less) (Urthboy feat. Lior). This gives the sense that political change is possible. At the moment, however, the branding collapses back

onto the item that it marks. Imagining oneself as a part of the ‘fam’ suggests political potential, yet attention returns to the importance of branding itself.

Branding is also implicated in a problem with individuals working with non-profit organisations, seen when Urthboy lent his image to The Wall of Hands campaign, and heard when he contributed a track to *The Key of Sea* (The Key of Sea). These campaigns and causes may have some positive impact in terms of improving some Indigenous literacy rates or raising awareness of refugees as people deserving of compassion. The self-branding involved, however, unavoidably returns some of the focus to the individual, which runs counter to the idea of placing focus on others’ plight. In these examples, Alison Hearn’s definition of self-branding as “an outer-directed form of self-promotion singularly focused on attracting attention and acquiring cultural and monetary value” is complicated (“Radical Eclectic” 317). When an artist such as Urthboy ‘loans’ their brand to a charitable cause by being the professional artist that collaborates on a track with refugees, or sharing a promotional photo of themselves for the Wall of Hands, it appears that they are not “singularly focused” on attracting attention back to themselves. However, attention nevertheless does return to the personal brand in these charitable activities.

Further, the political imagination involved in public performances of charity is limited, as it involves artists and public figures reaching out to help the disenfranchised become more like them: that is, literate and able to be good liberal subjects. The possibility of the reverse, of intervening in the lives of the privileged and powerful, is precluded. These sort of charitable activities, powered by the transaction of personal brands, limit the political critique of the artist involved. In fact, the saleability of a ‘conscious’ figure for a charity’s promotional use means that these examples can be readily accepted as politically critical without actually asking hard questions about, for example, whether Indigenous people or refugees asked for this kind of charity. A

conscious MC such as Urthboy's personal brand fits well with this way of 'helping' (he even coincidentally had an image holding his hand up to use for The Wall of Hands). The possibility of a visible artist being involved in a project to directly threaten the privileged and powerful seems much more unsettling.

Chapter 5: Whose Wavin' Flag?

In 2001 a young Somali-Canadian artist, K'naan, was invited to perform his poetry for UNHCR's fiftieth anniversary, which impressed world music star Youssou N'Dour. This resulted in two tracks of K'naan's being included in the UNCHR compilation album of refugee artists titled *Building Bridges* (Gates Jr., Akyeampong and Niven 404; UNHCR). Credited as his "big break", K'naan's inclusion in this event shows that his early self-branding was as a Somali poet who represents his people's stories on international platforms, and who even criticised the UN's actions in Somalia while doing it (Akyeampong and Niven 404). His personal brand included political critique in the sense of being a 'conscious' artist asked to represent his "people" (Spady, Lee and Alim 27). Other aspects of his brand presented in the UNHCR compilation are his use of "Afro-pop" and hip hop music styles, suggesting that he has a hybrid identity and mixes cultural resources from different places (Gates Jr., Akyeampong and Niven 404).

The logic of choosing K'naan to feature as a poetic spokesperson (who can also perform cheeky hip hop tracks) at high profile events endured. At the end of the same decade, in 2010, K'naan performed at *The Economist's* annual "The World In" Festival Gala in New York. The annual event is framed as a serious reflection on the 'world in' the next year, and beyond. K'naan was featured alongside former President Bill Clinton and other international politicians, writers, government and business figures. Indeed, the event was promoted as a chance for attendees to be in the same room as Clinton and K'naan and be fed by "Chef Jose Andres"; that is, to be alongside public figures whose brands include being a former 'leader of the free world', a socially critical African refugee artist, and a provider of gourmet food, all provided for gala attendees' consumption. To capitalise on his inclusion in the high profile event, K'naan was photographed with Clinton

and the photo was distributed to subscribers on his email list, which was sent by his record company (The Economist “Exclusive Offer”, A&MOctone “Up Close”). K’naan’s inclusion in *The Economist’s* event, alongside speakers on, for example, “philanthrocapitalism”, also attested to his prominence as Somali rapper and representative refugee artist (The Economist “The World In”). K’naan also has an entry in *The Dictionary of African Biography*, suggesting that he is a prominent African worth knowing about (Gates Jr., Akyeampong and Niven 404). This prominence is also seen in less ‘highbrow’ contexts, such as Wikipedia, where he is foregrounded in a “List of Notable Somalis” (Wikipedia “List”).

K’naan reflects on his visibility as an African, Somali, and refugee figure when he says that he is aware that is the “go-to guy on Africa” (freethechildrenintl). In both interviews and in his music K’naan portrays himself as someone who moves between African and Western cultures (freethechildrenintl; K’naan “Strugglin’; Stoker-Lavelle). For example, the biographical material on his websites will often note that the name ‘K’naan’ means “traveller” in the Somali language, and his second album invoked the image of the “troubadour” or wandering musician in its title (K’naan “Knaan”).

Using the role of troubadour in his personal brand reinforces K’naan’s emphasis on the importance of poetry to Somali culture, and as a part of his memories of his childhood there (freethechildrenintl; Stoker-Lavelle). This is an overt affiliation with the role of the conscious MC, to which K’naan adds his identification with the “old poets” (Haupt *Static* 194; K’naan “Until the Lion”; Mitchell and Pennycook 33). While the word ‘troubadour’ has a European history, K’naan uses it to signal that he is a representative of a “nation of poets” or the “poetic background of [his] nation”, invoking other eloquent Somalis, of whom he is the exemplar. ‘Troubadour’ also signals that, as an MC, his music and poetry take

him between worlds (freethechildrenintl; Stoker-Lavelle). K'naan reflected on the wandering aspect of the role in a 2009 interview:

In my music, I do address Africa in general ... I address Somalia more specifically because I know it more intimately. I was made in that stream. I owe a debt and gratitude to that world. But I think there is no real start and stop between being African and being an immigrant. My spirit is obsessed with movement, and the distance that is caused by the movement (Powers).

In this chapter I will show how this theme of movement between cultures is a key feature of K'naan's personal brand that was established early in his career, as featured in the '*The Dusty Foot Philosopher*' cover images, the track "Wash It Down", and the documentary program *4 Real: Kenya* (4REAL). The theme of movement allows K'naan to play with, and against, the traditions of conscious hip hop. That is, he also developed a personal brand of being articulate about social issues while personally knowing violence and so being masculine or 'hardcore'. This is seen in the analysis of lyrics and a fan video screenshot from the track "What's Hardcore?", and lyrics from "If Rap Gets Jealous". K'naan's self-branding also presents his Islamic heritage, which is seen in cover art images from the '*The Dusty Foot Philosopher*'. Together, these aspects of his brand—articulate, hardcore, and spiritual—are shown to be contradicted by his take on the idea of 'oneness', as particularly evinced through versions of his track "Wavin' Flag". In 2010 "Wavin' Flag" was used as a charity single for survivors of the Haiti earthquake and also for a multifaceted cross-branding exercise with Coca-Cola and FIFA for The World Cup. The contradiction between representing specific people and places and moving to be associated with an idea of global 'oneness' for corporate interests can seem to be a problem of so-called authenticity as an MC. In fact, I argue that the contradiction between consistency and flexibility is a feature of self-branding itself, particularly when found in the genre of conscious hip hop in a neoliberal era. This binds and limits K'naan's political critique.

The Distance That Is Caused by the Movement

K'naan and his family's movement from Mogadishu to Toronto is the key part of his life narrative that is performed, marketed and read as part of his personal brand. The following is typical of the way this part of his life is described on websites and in his biographical materials:

When the civil war in Somalia reached the capital Mogadishu, [in 1992] his parents emigrated with their 13 year old⁶³ son to Harlem, New York City, before moving to Canada, to the Toronto (Etobicoke) neighbourhood Jamestown in Rexdale, joining a small Somalia–Canadian community [sic], from where he started his musical career (discogs.com).

The description above not only stresses the way that K'naan's Somali identity is preserved in Canada by joining a "Somalia-Canadian community" but also directly links that hybrid identity to his subsequent musical career. The use of this biography in K'naan's personal branding, as found on websites such as discogs.com, links it with refugee narratives and their "central theme of loss" (Kushner and Knox 46; Sobral 23). K'naan's promotional material often emphasises his African origins, such as the Canadian television series *4 Real* which followed him travelling to Kenya to visit fellow Somalis in refugee camps that have become large slums (4REAL). Yet his brand also speaks for Western and African audiences; as someone who moves between worlds. Like Ladi6, he is presenting a marginalised identity within his publicly deployed brand.

This is particularly evident in his debut album, *The Dusty Foot Philosopher*. One side of the printed cover booklet can be unfolded and made into a poster and hung on a wall, or else studied while holding it⁶⁴. This poster references a number of generic

⁶³ Some repetitions of this narrative place K'naan as 12 or 14 at the time of emigration.

⁶⁴ K'naan's merchandise includes t-shirts and hoodies, but not the more unusual items like Urthboy's stubbie holder or Ladi6's tea towel. The poster is, at the time of writing, the one item that has a similar ability to be displayed in domestic space (Universal Music Group).

'African' elements, such as silhouettes of acacia trees against a yellow, orange, and red sunset (Abrams) (Figure 30).



FIGURE 30. COVER/POSTER FROM THE DUSTY FOOT ON THE ROAD. PHOTOGRAPH BY PEDRO ALTUNA.

K'naan's figure looms over other design elements. He is pictured as a live performer, with a mic stand included in the image. The layer of red texture, which could also represent dust or paint gives the sense of a raw, direct experience of performance. This is reinforced by the uplifted hands of a celebrating crowd. As previously stated, cover art "gives information about the genre of the music, the prominence (actual or desired) of the performer, and even the themes and moods of the album" (Eckstein 97-99; Sobral 26). The information presented in this combined cover art/poster is that the genre may be 'African' and use drumming and vocals, that K'naan is (or hopes to be) prominent as he is of giant proportions relative to his multi-layered crowd, and that the theme of the album

may reflect on his role as a performer and on his heritage, while also having a 'stripped down' immediacy made possible through using a single drum and his voice. This immediacy is in fact borne out by the track "Until the Lion Learns to Speak" on the album (K'naan "Until the Lion Learns to Speak").

From my physical drumming experience, I know that the positioning of the *djembe* across K'naan's body means that he could only play simple rhythms. This suggests that his drumming is not virtuosic, but that it is nevertheless important to the branding of this album. Including the *djembe* in this image reinforces the role of travelling troubadour in K'naan's brand; it proposes he can craft an engaging performance using only his voice and simple rhythmic accompaniment. This places powerful vocal and performance skills as a part of his personal brand. The inclusion of the drum and vocal mic conveys that K'naan uses the role of travelling troubadour; that he has a poetic message to share from his experience of moving between worlds.

The phrase within K'naan's logo in this poster reads "The Dusty Foot On the Road", which is the title of the live album. The idea of taking '*The Dusty Foot Philosopher*' album 'on the road' reinforces the sense that K'naan is close to the earth and humble; a travelling poet of the people. However, he looms over a large crowd of diminutive fans in this image. The cover image inflates his status as a performer to sell the live album, while also promoting the album as a commodified version of experiencing the travelling poet directly. This contradictory meaning is deployed in this branded item to feed into K'naan's overarching "meta-narrative" (Hearn "Radical Eclectic" 198). K'naan's overarching personal brand therefore uses a version of the conscious MC role, putting forward the notion that he brings important, poetic, and rhythmic messages as a performer. This is political work as it valorises a Somali refugee as a poet-philosopher, in contrast to media depictions that present refugees as an unwanted problem for host countries (BBC News).

The phrase 'dusty foot philosophy' is heard in the track "For Mahmoud (Soviet)" on *The Dusty Foot Philosopher* album. K'naan says in a spoken voice in the introduction to the track that his "... "closest friend who got killed ... the way I used to see him was as the The Dusty Foot Philosopher" (K'naan "For Mohamoud (Soviet)"). This phrase speaks of lived experience in the body (having dusty feet) while also being an intellectual; a philosopher. Being connected to the earth with no shoes also suggests individual and cultural nobility in a situation of poverty. This places K'naan as a spokesperson who honours his thoughtful deceased friend, and others like him. This establishes a sincere testament to ordinary people's philosophy as a part of his personal brand. This is a political statement in the sense of valuing underrepresented people as intellectuals, which is a variation on a conscious artist 'representing' them.

K'naan's logo is seen in this poster. It uses Arabic calligraphy style and so references his Islamic cultural heritage (which is discussed further later in this chapter). Like 'philosopher', the connotations of Arabic calligraphy are refinement of thought and expression. The importance of refinement in Arabic calligraphy in turn points to "the importance of writing, and especially of beautiful writing, in Islamic culture" (Schimmel and Rivolta 3). Including this logo in this object brings the cultural element of Islamic calligraphy into K'naan's personal brand, suggesting that beautiful, refined expression are some of the "unique", individual qualities that make up his personal brand statement (Arruda). The suggestion is made that such refinement is taken "on the road" to K'naan's audience; that he publicly shares a positive expression of refinement influenced by his Islamic heritage. This is a political act, as it valorises a Muslim identity in a public way.

A city skyline, K'naan's calligraphic logo, the image of K'naan, and silhouettes of a crowd and tree branches all combine to present K'naan as a traveller who moves between the city, the country and the stage. This branded image also suggests movement between

the worlds of Somalia and North America. This is reflected in Ana Sobral's reading of *The Dusty Foot Philosopher* as the work of a diasporic rapper. She states that,

[d]iasporic rappers use their position as double outsiders (belonging neither to America nor to the African American community) as well as their distinctive cultural heritage in order to transform hip hop from its predominant status as a portrait of life in the American ghettos to a more general reflection about the place of the performer in the world at large (Sobral 21).

K'naan's personal brand is that of a "diasporic rapper" who reflects on "the place of the performer in the world at large" (Sobral 21). The cover art/poster conveys meaning this in a meta-fashion, as it points to the very idea of a live recording of an album tour, which promises the consumer something close to the experience of live performance. This reinforces the message that K'naan is a philosopher of the road, who reflects on his communicative function, on "the place of the performer in the world at large" as he speaks, raps and sings into the mic (Sobral 21). The message of a reflective philosopher is housed in his personal brand, and is part of what is promised when obtaining this live album. Listeners already familiar with *The Dusty Foot Philosopher* album may then buy the live album, which is the closest thing to being at a live show if they missed out on the tour (or if they are a dedicated fan who wants to experience both). Further, the option is presented that a listener could stick this poster to their wall and so bring K'naan's self-branding as a contemporary 'philosopher of the road' into their own domestic space.

The idea that K'naan took his album, and the concept of being a 'The Dusty Foot Philosopher', on the road reinforces the role of troubadour, which in turn echoes with his references to the Somali poetic tradition. K'naan's album tour references the idea of taking the "African way" to the world (which is the title of one of the tracks on *The Dusty Foot Philosopher* album) (K'naan "The African Way"). As a visible representative of Somalia and a refugee diaspora, presenting this 'African way' could be specific. Yet, the graphic

design in this promotional item is generic, particularly the vectorised silhouettes of a crowd waving their arms and trees at the bottom of the image⁶⁵. The stereotypical association of an Africa with the sunset colour palette, the silhouette of a tree and a drum is well established (Abrams). K'naan's invocation of "imagined communities" is flexible and moves from those of Somalia, diasporic enclaves and a generic 'Africa' (Anderson).

The generic images of Africa used in this poster are consistent with the way *The Dusty Foot Philosopher* album begins (but this opening is soon complicated). The opening track, "Wash It Down", begins with a sample of water drumming and voices, much like an ethnomusicological field recording. The very first sound heard on the album is sonically different to hip hop's emphasis on electronically produced beats, as it opens with the sound of drumming on the surface of water. Melodic speaking voices enter, suggesting the music and rhythm of everyday life. The water drumming can have connotations of being 'primal', yet also suggests the innovative and resourceful tactics of those without drums who literally drum on their environment. This suggests that a rhythmic essence is in action, that this is hip hop 'taken back' to its fundamental elements of acoustic beat and word. This is a musical rendering of the historicising of hip hop as connected to African American and African 'roots' (Rose *Black Noise* 3; Sobral 27; Stapleton 220). Yet instead of taking the perspective of African Americans 'looking back to' previous cultural forms, here K'naan is laying claim to hip hop by presenting a rap backed by water drumming in the present. Thus, the very first sounds of the album feed into K'naan's personal brand as a striking poet who is staking a unique position as a refugee MC.

The choice to use water drumming to take the rhythmic part, and including background voices recorded as-if-from-the-field powerfully gives a sense of immediacy, of placing the listener in 'Africa'. Like some African hand drumming, the water drumming has

⁶⁵ I commissioned a poster design from a similar era and the designer used similar images. The crowd silhouettes are generic and have been used widely.

distinct bass and slap sounds. However, it is soon apparent that this is not a 'pure' field recording of 'African simplicity', as might be associated with many world music and electronica albums, particularly from the 1990s (Baka Beyond). If the instrumentation suggests a 'raw African experience', K'naan's rapped lyrics, by contrast, make multiple references to life both in developing countries and in rich, Western nations such as North America:

When you're here in the water, you feel like it's sorta
 Releasing your tension, the stress and disorder
 Is big in America Stephanie, Erica
 Both of them suffer from living in Harry 'cos [huh]

Living is very competitive
 Hassling creditors, hazardous accidents
 Driving with negligence, too many beverages
 People got too many things on they lettuce, there's

TVs, deadliest, professing the ugliest
 War, war, war, war, what the hell you keep on killin' me for?
 Please, won't you come and bend down low,
 Let me tell you what little I know

And if it's worth somethin', spread it indeed,
 Like shit and vomit that's under your feet

I was born in a pot, boiling black and hot
 Waiting to be tasted and rappin' a lot
 But justice would not come and eat my flesh
 Instead I had poverty to feed my stress

Until my life became an ode to the gun
 Not needed like an overcoat to the sun
 So I thought I was just made to exist [yeah]
 Not to live or, change and resist

But fear will have you believe in fear
 Paralysed, have you believe in tears

This is the therapy needed, so use it
 Music is water, you know what my proof is? [what?]
 People need music like they need excuses [Huh]
 People need water like Kanye needs Jesus

So wash it down...
 I know you stressin', this is a little meditation for you to relax and jump in the pool
 and, you know, sink, and sing:

My people drum on water, drink on water, live on water, die for water x 2

The drumming reflects the theme of water and washing down, both as a “meditation for you to relax and jump in the pool”, like a cleansing or baptism, and also as a “washing down” of bad food. K’naan’s lyrics use the listener’s desire for healing and escape from “your tension, the stress and disorder”, while presenting his life narrative of past trauma, which is meant to jolt the listener; “[I]ike shit and vomit that’s under your feet”. He has a sly dig at the ills of the ‘developed world’ with its “too many beverages” and “too many things on they lettuce”, suggesting that these worries are nothing compared to what he speaks of.

The play of K’naan’s multi-tracked vocals pan across stereo speakers, creating a sense of internal voices in dialogue, or whispering ghosts. The effect of this internal talk produces an emotional ambivalence, a sing-song lightness with an anxious edge. The lightness corresponds with the ascending and descending play of pitch as his rap plays with degrees of being ‘sung’, which also picks up the playful feel of the water-drummed triplets (groups of three beats) and the children’s voices. The anxious edge is reinforced by K’naan’s nasal delivery. However, both are tempered by a rhythmic holding pattern, creating the mix of a lulling sing-song track and a litany of traumatic or problematic aspects of life. This rhythmic pattern revolves around the bass note (**b**) of the water drumming, on the first and fourth beats of each cycle of twelve, balanced by slapped accents (**s**) on the seventh and tenth beats (Figure 31):

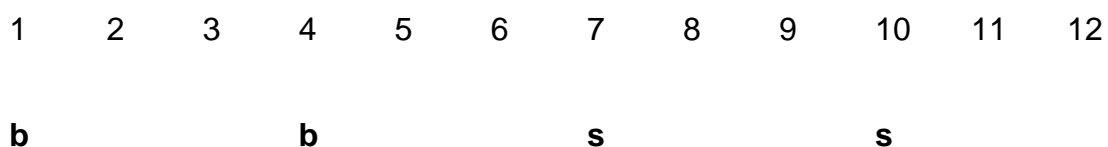


FIGURE 31. 12/8 WATER DRUMMING RHYTHM OF “WASH IT DOWN”

This 12/8 pattern, broken up into triplets, is a rhythm heard in much African music, where ten 12/8 patterns have been described as stemming from “one or two ‘canonical’”

patterns (Toussaint 1). 12/8, with four main pulses as indicated above, has also been found to run through many Jamaican children's songs and suggested to also be connected to Afro-American swing (Hopkin 7-8). This rhythm has a playful skipping feel, which K'naan's anxious lyrics work against. In fact, the anxiety that builds in K'naan's voice highlights that the recurring triplet feels like a holding pattern, such as when a game (such as the rhythmic double-dutch jump rope) can start to feel restrictive as the rhythmic loop repeats.

In the eighth verse, K'naan signifies on Kanye West's track "Jesus Walks", the leading single from Kanye West's debut album *The College Dropout* (Kanye West *The College Dropout*). West's track is a melodramatic narrative of redemption through belief in Jesus, which centres on a prostitute, a drug dealer and an elderly alcoholic man. K'naan explicitly invokes West's track through the line, "people need water like Kanye needs Jesus", which riffs on West's lines, "I'm just trying to say the way school needs teachers/The way Kathie Lee needed Regis that's the way I need Jesus"⁶⁶, managing to suggest that 'need' has radically different connotations in different places. K'naan is fulfilling the hip hop requirement of verbally 'taking on' an influential hip hop figure, which signals audacity, particularly considering the explosive success of West's debut album. K'naan also displays a subtle dig in this signification on West's track: here West's "need" for Jesus seems paltry when compared to K'naan's "people's" need for water. This is a sly and unexpected comparison. It is reinforced with thickened vocal tracks and its place at the end of a verse.

K'naan also signifies on Edwin Starr's Motown hit, "War", when he says in a sing-song voice with a playful triplet rhythm with descending pitch: "War, war, war, war—what the hell you keep on killin' me for?" (Edwin Starr). Yet instead of Urthboy protesting war

⁶⁶ Kathie Lee and Regis are American daytime television presenters.

that occurs in 'the great elsewhere', such as in Vietnam, or is broadcast as a part of a 'distant sense of random menace' from faraway Rwanda, here K'naan's perspective is "what the hell you keep on killin' *me* for" [my emphasis]. This signals that K'naan has an insider experience of war (and that he is speaking for those who do). The swung rhythm makes the lyrics catchy and memorable, and differentiates the song from the 'straight' rhythms of much rap delivery. The sing-song style suggests that K'naan is singing for children that are killed in war.

K'naan refers to African-American rap and soul figures and his personal experience in Somalia within the demands of rap's rhyming composition. As Ana Sobral stated, *The Dusty Foot Philosopher* album covers both K'naan's "experiences in war-torn Somalia and the "urban jungle" of North America" (22). This is reflected in the references to death from war and thirst and the practice of signifying on other tracks and artists. Both his lyrics and the water drumming suggest that K'naan is representing those who *do* die for water, and who *are* killed in wars, such as Somalis. As a diasporic rapper, in "Wash It Down" K'naan raps for an imagined community: when he raps, "what the hell you keep on killin' me for", he is speaking as if he is all of those who die from war and thirst. Signification in his lyrics, together with sing-song references to traumatic deaths, present a jarring comparison of famous musicians and the suffering of many people. This is a compelling combination, which works to further communicate K'naan's personal brand. He is presented as someone who can confront listeners while displaying knowledge of other cultural figures.

This is reinforced in interviews when K'naan describes dropping out of high school in Canada and learning English by listening to hip hop albums that his father sent him (freethechildrenintl). This repeats the notion that K'naan is an intellectual without institutional learning—his philosophy is innate. He also exhibits knowledge of the hip hop canon when he drops the names of these artists as being Eric B. and Rakim and describes

their work as “quality stuff” (freethechildrenintl). The lyrical elements of “Wash It Down” also reinforce this “personal brand statement” of being a politically outspoken philosopher who developed his thoughts outside of institutional learning (Arruda).

“Wash It Down” appears to be an invitation to healing for the listener. Yet, it finishes on the line “die for water” and then removes all other elements to finish on the water drumming alone. This creates an unsettling effect. At the beginning, water drumming seems to be an innocent snapshot of ‘tribal life’ or a joyful children’s game, yet at the conclusion of the track it points to people dying of thirst. K’naan simultaneously pulls on the allure for some listeners of a exoticised, simplistic beauty in listening in on ‘African life’, while countering this with a blast of lyrics which point to the privations of “dying for water”. This shows a heightened awareness of the ways that a “global community of hip hop fans” may hear water drumming and so imagine ‘African life’, while also using the fantasy of a simplistic people to confront the same listener with their suffering (Sobral 26).

K’naan performs this confrontation by talking across the rhythm and addressing the listener directly and conversationally; “I know you stressin’, so this is a little meditation for you to relax, and jump in the pool, and you know, sink, and sing”. This transitions into (ahead of the beat, creating the feeling of jumping in), “My people drum on water, drink on water, live on water, die for water”. This creates the expectation of lovely escapism, perhaps for a Western listener, while with the multi-tracked vocals in an African tonality shift to show that K’naan is singing and rapping for his “people” who “die for water”.

In this track, K’naan’s branded self is reflexively making a *study of itself* through the use of water drumming and children’s voices, which invoke world music productions that exoticise an African ‘Other’ (Baka Beyond). Using these African elements against K’naan’s anxious, sing-song rap presents a perspective of a refugee who must negotiate different cultures; who has an “in-between position” as a diasporic rapper (Sobral 26). In this way

K'naan points to different magnitudes of suffering, yet a common desire for healing. The track has been characterised by Sobral as a prologue (with the entire *The Dusty Foot Philosopher* album being an epic), in which K'naan performs the expected function of addressing muses (26). She states that the muses K'naan honours in “Wash It Down” are “water and music” (26). This can be heard in the invitation to the listener

So wash it down...
I know you stressin', this is a little meditation for you to relax and jump in the pool
and, you know, sink, and sing

K'naan invites the listener in to also honour his muses of water and music, which is presented as therapeutic: a listener can “wash down” what they have consumed, “meditate”, “relax”, “jump”, “sink”, and “sing”. K'naan uses the desire for D.I.Y music/water therapy to highlight the different degrees of suffering between Africa and the ‘developed’ world. This invokes his apparent knowledge of what is, truly, ‘hardcore’ (Figure 32).

Articulate and Hardcore



FIGURE 32. SCREENSHOT, FAN VIDEO OF “WHAT’S HARDCORE?” (OZEY78723)

I'm from the most dangerous city in the universe
 You're likely to get shot at birth (K'naan "If Rap Gets Jealous").

By writing and performing lyrics of his childhood in war-torn Mogadishu, K'naan adheres to the hip hop requirement of rapping about where he 'came from', and thus establishing authenticity or legitimacy to speak. Where K'naan 'comes from' includes being a child amidst the onset of civil war in Somalia in 1991, an experience of knowing violence that he uses to trump the gangsta stereotype of being a "bad man" (Lewis 1). K'naan's 'blood raps' play the competitive gangsta game of proving experiences of violence, or at least performing spectacular rhymes *about* them. This 'repping' is a performance of specific origins and experiences; yet is also an imaginative gesture of empathy to all who experience violence, as seen in a dedication to the album from which the track comes: "to all moments when justice snubs us" (K'naan *The Dusty Foot Philosopher*).

When evoking scenes from his childhood memories K'naan also presents the idea that he *knows* what is truly hardcore, and further, that he is articulate, or poetic and critical, about it. He signals this in a meta fashion in the third track of *The Dusty Foot Philosopher*, titled "What's Hardcore" (released in Canada in 2005, re-released the United States in 2008):

I put a pen to the paper this time it's visual as possible
 Guns blasted the hospital
 The walls are whitewashed with tin rooftops
 To show love you lick two shots its dangerous man

Journalists hire gunmen there's violent women
 Kids trust no-one 'cos fire burned them
 Refugees die in boats headed for peace
 Is anyone scared of death here? Nuttin' to these

I walk by the old ladies selling coconuts under the tree
 Life is cheap here but wisdom is free
 The beach boys hang on the side, leaning with pride
 Scam artists and gangsters feedin' the fight

I walk with three kids that can't wait to meet God baby

That's Bucktooth, Mohammed and Crybaby
What they do every day just to eat, lord have mercy
Strapped with an A-K and they bloodthirsty

[Chorus]

So what's hardcore, really, are you hardcore? Mmm [x2]

We begin our day by the weight of the gun
Rocket propelled grenades blow you away if you front
We got no police, ambulance or fire fighters
We start riots by burnin' car tyres

They lootin' and everybody starts shootin'
Bullshit politicians talkin' 'bout solutions
But it's all talk, you can't go half a block without a roadblock,
And if you don't pay at the roadblock you get your throat shot

And each roadblock is set up by these gangsters
And different gangsters go by different standards,
For example, the evening is a no-go
Unless you wanna wear a bullet like a logo

In the day you should never take the alleyway [word]
They only thing that validates you is the A-K
They chew on chat; it's sorta like coke and these
And there ain't no police

[Chorus]

So what's hardcore, really, are you hardcore? Mmm? [x 2]

I'm 'a spit these verses 'cos I feel annoyed
And I'm not gonna quit 'till I feel devoid
If I rhyme about home and got descriptive
I'd make 50Cent look like Limp Bizkit

It's true, and don't make me rhyme about you
I'm from where the kids is addicted to glue
Get ready, he got a good grip on the machete
Make rappers say they do it for love like R Kelly

It's hard, harder than Harlem and Compton intertwined
Harder than harbouring blood and then rewind
To that earlier part, when I was like:

We begin our day by the weight of the gun
Rocket propelled grenades blow you away if you front
We got no police, ambulance or fire fighters
We start riots by burnin' car tyres

They lootin' and everybody starts shootin'

[Chorus]

So what's hardcore, really, are you hardcore? Mmm
So what's hardcore, [Question is] are you hardcore? Mmm

Are you hardcore? Mmm
 Are you hardcore? Really x 2 (K'naan "What's Hardcore")

K'naan uses the hip hop terms “front”⁶⁷, “show love”, and “hard”. At the same time, he recalls a Somali scene that includes “rocket propelled grenades” and “A-K[s]”, thereby raising the stakes on boasts of gangsta weaponry that you face if you “front”. This displays that he is a hip hop insider who speaks its language while he describes a location “harder” than the gangsta scene of an inner city American ghetto.

“A-Ks” are mentioned twice. The second occurrence is reinforced by coming at the end of a line, with each letter pronounced clearly and at half the speed to the rest of the syllables in that line. This works to emphasise “A-K”, the name of the weapon. This displays first hand knowledge of weapons and establishes a hardness associated with a Black ‘hypermasculinity’ that has in turn been associated with gangsta (Baldwin; Lewis; Pitt and Sanders 39).

K'naan connects “gangsters” with “scam artists”, implying that he does not condone gangsters while his testimonial rap also boasts that he has experienced violence. He mocks gangsta’s performance of being violent and contrasts this with the real effects of being shot at in the line, “The evening is a no-go, unless you want to wear a bullet like a logo”. This striking simile attacks both gangsta rappers and their fans who want to wear branded clothes with prominent logos as a status symbol. This is contrasted with the detailed immediacy of having your “throat shot” at a roadblock. Where K'naan is from, you worry about wearing bullets, not branded clothing. The shocking nature of this phrase suggests that K'naan is mocking rappers aligned with commercial brands.

⁶⁷ From AAVE, meaning to step forward into a rap battle, or else push yourself and your skills forward generally. The term can also be used to mock, as ‘you frontin’ can mean you stepped forward, but you had no skills or substance behind your ‘front’.

Instead of an oppositional take on the police intrinsic to the gangsta narrative (most memorably articulated in N.W.A's song title, "Fuck Tha Police"), in the Somalia K'naan describes, there are "no police", instead there is "lootin' and everybody starts shootin'". The situation K'naan describes is even 'more hardcore' than the gangsta rap that boasts of being at war with the police. Here there is a threat of true lawlessness. K'naan takes a position against the gangsters who are "feeding the fight" while showing that he knows the context in which they thrive. This has some correlation with a reading of M.I.A's "Bucky Done Gun", which stated that "the song and video mix the signifiers of sex and violence found in Western hip-hop and place them within a refugee/guerrilla context, critiquing the way violence operates as a mindset and logic that has consequences for the material bodies involved" (Creech 275). K'naan's critique of "the way violence operates as a mindset and logic" is directed towards the gangsta figure (as also disseminated through Western hip hop), but also directs this critique towards the warlords in Somalia who are feeding the fight which has "consequences for the material bodies" there.

Each verse's addition to a chaotic picture of violence is framed by the chorus, which is addressed to both MCs and fans who think they are "hardcore". The track clearly seeks to re-set what is thought of as hardcore. K'naan's lyrics contrast the rhetorical question "what's hardcore?" in each chorus with lines such as, "I'm from where the kids is addicted to glue/Get ready, he got a good grip on the machete" [sic]. He destabilises the notion of 'hardcore' while displaying that he comes out on top: that, where he's from, glue-sniffing is pervasive and children are murderous addicts, *true* nihilists who can't wait to "meet God" (West). In his narrative, these are the values of survival; "what they do to eat each day, lord have mercy". These children—boys—are given first names, and even a nickname,

"Crybaby", which suggests mockery on a school playground, a jarring contrast with the environments these children must endure. The use of names works to invite an outside listener to the Somali scene to imagine if the people that they knew by name were "strapped with an A-K and they bloodthirsty".

In this track K'naan is not *explicitly* saying that *he is* hardcore. His tactics manage to both present his hip hop credibility as superior to that of the African-American gangsta imaginary (as imitated by some commercial hip hop artists such as 50Cent) as his "home" is "hard, harder than Harlem and Compton intertwined". Here "Compton" refers to the popular gangsta album by N.W.A., *Straight Outta Compton* (Cashmore *The Black Culture Industry* 165; N.W.A "Straight Outta Compton"). At the same time, he also casts doubt on the entire discourse of being hardcore. The song is like flashing a trump card of ultimate 'hardness' as a threat and mocking the whole game, but never quite putting that card down.

This strategy sets K'naan up as a conscious wordsmith, or "the cerebral amigo" (K'naan "The African Way"). This critical position is used to simultaneously claim supremacy and re-define hardcore through threats such as "don't make me rap about you", "make rappers say they do it for love like R Kelly"⁶⁸ and "I make 50Cent look like Limp Bizkit".⁶⁹ This works to intervene in a hierarchy of hardcore authenticity and its opposite by also letting the 'lameness' of Limp Bizkit's and R. Kelly's names fulfil the rhyme and end their respective lines. Those names are therefore emphasised and resonate for the listener (particularly as K'naan speaks them clearly for maximum impact).

⁶⁸ R Kelly is an R'n'B singer whose ballads are seen as the opposite of 'hardcore'. This line may refer to R Kelly's single "Step in the Name of Love" which features lyrics such as "groove in the name of love" (R Kelly).

⁶⁹ 50Cent is a rapper from Queens, popular predominantly through the 2000s, whose own biography includes being shot 9 times, and has had many well-publicised 'battles' with other artists. Limp Bizkit's style as a 'nu-metal', 'rapcore' or 'rap metal' band is derided by both metal and hip hop fans (and others) as being the worst of both genres, with their lyrics being overwhelmingly derivative. These are some of the reasons why both would work as names for K'naan to insult. 50Cent's popularity and sex appeal to 'the ladies' works to make him effeminate and not 'hard'; and the lead singer of Limp Bizkit, Fred Durst's publicised affairs with female celebrities, and the fact that he is White, are others.

This is part of what a hip hop listener may listen for: how the rhymes are fulfilled. Fulfilling these insults by using these artists' names in this way helps the listener situate K'naan as opposite to these artists, that is, as possessing authenticity and hardness without him having to overtly claim these attributes. K'naan references these hip hop artists to establish himself within the domain of MCing as a competition of masculinity.

"What's Hardcore" is a clear 'rapping back' to the figure of the gangsta rapper itself. This position was reinforced by a YouTube user who made a fan video of "Whats Hardcore" that combines news footage and photos of Somali gunmen and child soldiers (as seen in Figure 31) with K'naan's track (OZEY78723). A comment on this fan video reads: "[n]ow this Hardcore Hardship. Got these fools talking tough out here. Spend an hr [sic] here you cry for your mother" (Havoc1521). "Fools" (implicitly the rappers that K'naan addresses) would be so hurt by the hardship in Africa that they would cry for their mother. Crying and being attached to a woman, specifically a mother, are both associated with femininity, and therefore are deployed to suggest that rappers are weak (Talib Kweli, 9th Wonder feat. Add 2). This shows how a track such as "What's Hardcore?", and its reception, enters into a discourse of masculine competition in hip hop. K'naan's personal brand as hardcore is repeated by these online users in the fan video and comment. His position of critiquing gangsta (and its influence in commercial hip hop) is successfully received in these examples.

However, the ominous implication of "What's Hardcore?" is that the world that K'naan describes is not only imagined for the sake of competitive talk, but in places such as Somalia, real children embody and act out gangsta's violent, masculine posturing. Leveraging the 'hardcore' nature of such a reality is a testament to K'naan's individual resilience, yet is also worried by the fact that real gangsterism encountered at roadblocks in Somalia also relies on the same display of violent "hypermasculinity" (Baldwin; Lewis).

That is, as K'naan raps about the real violence in Somalia to (temporarily) claim a 'win' in the competitive battle of hip hop, he implies that this is a winning strategy to claim the ultimate masculinity. That is, he repeats the practice of equating 'real' masculinity with dominance through real or threatened violence. The everyday, cyclic trauma of Somalis is used as a brag for K'naan's hip hop authenticity. This is then deployed in his personal brand and repeated in items such as the fan video. K'naan's critique of hip hop's debate about 'what's hardcore?' is limited, as he himself uses the notion of hardcore to advance his personal brand.

For example, the track's 'winning' or annihilating lines such as "I come from the most dangerous city in the universe/You're likely to get shot at birth" can be repeated by K'naan's fans with an appreciative nod, as less poetically riffed on in the YouTube comment above (Havoc1521). K'naan's question of what's hardcore is connected to a self-reflexive move by some hip hop artists to return to 'real hip hop', heard, for example, at a 'hip hop summit' and a panel at a writer's festival (Campbelltown Arts Centre: Hip Hop Versus). While the nature of what qualifies as 'real' hip hop is open for (endless) debate, K'naan's emphasis on rapping about suffering in Somalia falls within the authenticity imperative to bring the news of where he is from and what he knows. In another track from *The Dusty Foot Philosopher*, "If Rap Gets Jealous":

I don't want anyone dismissing me as some thug or some shit like that ...
 So I could rap quench my thirst I don't even hear verses no more,
 I hear jerkin' off punks with lip glosses and purses
 I don't see anybody operating shit anymore, I see nurses
 Fuck that, I'm gonna stay alive, I'd rather do a stage dive

[Chorus]

And if rap gets jealous 'cos I rock heavy
 It don't worry me if motherfuckers don't get it
 If rap gets jealous 'cos of where I headed
 I used to be public enemy don't forget it (K'naan "If Rap Gets Jealous")

K'naan implies a 'real' hip hop elitism, as some "motherfuckers don't get it" because he "rock[s] heavy". He insults others MCs' masculinity, implying that they are only masturbating in their raps, that their posturing is like teenage boys, juvenile and embarrassing. Further, other rappers are figured as female "nurses" with "lip glosses and purses". These insults are the central signifying logic of an overwhelmingly heterosexual male-dominated competitive practice. Yet K'naan seems to be enters into this arena of competitive wordplay while also dismissing the genre these credentials are essential to, "rap". That is, he mocks the inauthentic masculine competition of gangsta while fulfilling the same logic of insults. He suggests that where he is "headed" is to be famous and commercially successful (as indeed he was for a time with the later "Celebration Mixes") (Fast Company Staff), yet he also claims that, that he 'comes from' being as hard as the landmark group, "public enemy". K'naan also presents run-of-the-mill sexism: calling other men 'nurses' (stereotypically female, and therefore inferior) is something of a hip hop staple.

K'naan does not refer to women as 'bitches and hos' or make use of their bodies in booty videos (Andsager; Fitts 212; Peoples 24). However, he does occasionally nod to the method of proving "hypermasculine" authenticity found in phrases that sexual violence, such as "women who give me neck [oral sex] suffer from whiplashes" (deGenova 108-9; K'naan "The Dusty Foot Philosopher"). This is at odds with his self-branding as conscious, or set in opposition to a "thug or some shit like that", as set out in Figure 10 in the literature review. This points to the ways that the codes of competitive masculinity are deeply embedded in hip hop MCing, even for 'conscious' artists, and that a neat binary opposition between conscious and gangsta qualities does not bear out when looking at artists such as K'naan. If Black men do indeed "consciously choose" to perform hypersexuality as a

form of “oppositional” masculinity, then K’naan occasionally references this as a way to perform his own cutting lines in an arena of masculine competition (Miller-Young 273).

Yet, at the same time, K’naan’s embodied performance undermines the platitudes that reinforce expected ideas of masculinity. K’naan’s body is slim and he does not highlight his muscles, refraining from the stereotypical gangsta poses that emphasise a ‘tough’ body, such as displaying guns against bulging biceps (also known as ‘guns’), displayed by, for example, 50Cent (this observation is also made by Sobral) (26). His clothes emphasise his slim, long body, almost always topped by a signature cocked hat (Fast Company Staff; freethechildrenintl). The hat features in several of K’naan’s album covers and in promotional photos, both of which are distributed widely, as seen in the results of a google image search for ‘K’naan’ (Google).

K’naan often uses the gesture of stroking his chin thoughtfully, such as in between phrases during acapella spoken word performance, or during a televised interview (freethechildrenintl; VersesfortheMasses). He used the chin-stroking pose for the cover of his second album, *Troubadour*, and the image was then widely dispersed to market the album (Genius). Using the role of a thoughtful philosopher is also a way to enter the domain of battling through clever lyrics in hip hop. This means that K’naan can play in a competitive field that is figured as masculine without having to display a muscular body or adopt aggressive poses. The idea that, accordingly, K’naan’s rapped lyrics from *The Dusty Foot Philosopher* do indeed constitute philosophy is accepted by many fans, interviewers, and critics (Gates Jr., Akyeampong and Niven 404; freethechildrenintl; Powers; Sobral; Stoker-Lavelle).

Being a poetic philosopher is not only a way to enter a masculine arena without mimicking stereotypes of thuggery. K’naan has also attributed this to his heritage in Somalia, a

nation of poets, where poetry is primarily the form of communication we use, so if you can imagine newspapers and textbooks combined, that's poetry in Somalia. It informs our everyday life and everything about our history is collected and coded in the memory bank of poetry (freethechildrenintl).

The role of philosopher-poet is central to his self-branding, which he reinforces in his interviews. The tension between being both an 'articulate' thinker, writer, and rapper, yet also 'hardcore' enough to compete in a domain of bragging and insults that reference violence is a productive one for his self-branding. These elements mix attributes given to both conscious and gangsta MCs (Figure 10). A further dimension to this mix is the use of Islamic elements.

Wearing the Message

K'naan's deployment of Islamic imagery and motifs in the cover art of his early work sets him apart (Figure 33).



FIGURE 33. THE DUSTY FOOT PHILOSOPHER COVER ART. PHOTOGRAPH BY PEDRO ALTUNA.

This cover art for *The Dusty Foot Philosopher*, for example, uses Arabic calligraphy design and Arabesque graphic elements, which continue throughout the printed cover booklet (in the compact disc version). These elements can also be found on K'naan's profile pictures or avatars on many websites and when he is discussed in the media and on blogs (for example, Genius).

The inclusion of these elements brings the 'message' that K'naan has a religious, cultural, and philosophical heritage. His hands are in a position of Islamic prayer, held softly, with 'low tone' in the muscles, which contrasts with the notion of being 'hardcore' or threatening. The pose also suggests that the album is a prayer or spiritual transmission. The soft focus of the camera, the soft colour wash of the background, and the partly faded overlay of an Arabesque pattern suggest nuance, interiority and a private space of prayer. However, this image is chosen to present K'naan to his listener on compact disc cover art. This suggests that the themes and moods of the album include K'naan's private prayer (Eckstein 97-9).

K'naan's hands are presented forwards towards the camera lens in a position of prayer. Yet, he is not didactic in his use of Islamic references, unlike Islamic hip hop artists such as the North American MC Tyson, who explicitly declare a desire "to teach people about Allah and his Messenger" (Khabeer 127). The official video for K'naan's track "Strugglin" features Somali-Canadian women, some wearing *hijab*, and some men wearing the Muslim cap or *taqiyah*. K'naan's costume choices use urban street wear or "world fashion", which has been able to be worn by men in the Somali diaspora as it is seen as congruent with the Qur'anic teaching that they be covered from the navel to the knee (Akou 110).

Yet, rather than being overtly didactic by including lyrics that teach listeners to follow Islamic practices, K'naan is more usefully grouped with artists such as Mos Def,

who, for example, murmurs the opening to Qur'anic verses and prayers, "*Bismillah ar Rahman i Rahim*" (in the name of God, the all merciful and compassionate) in the introduction to 1999's "Fear Not of Man", and who later changed his performance name to his Muslim one of Yasiin Bey (Mos Def "Fear Not of Man").

Both K'naan and Mos Def are examples of MCs whose personal brands include elements from a religious heritage. K'naan's synergy with such artists was made explicit through collaborations and touring together, with K'naan and Mos Def freestyling verses in a version of K'naan's track "My God", where both riff on hardship, violence in their respective homes, and the difficulty of representing this in a popular music format (xhackermx1). The implication when such artists include Islamic references (lyrical or visual) is that their work is spiritually motivated, not that they are positioning themselves as dogmatic preachers. As K'naan reflected to academic Tony Mitchell, being Muslim is something he "does", instead of talks about (Mitchell and Pennycook; Sewald). So, K'naan includes some elements of Islamic culture in his brand, but does not overtly preach about Islam. The Islamic elements reinforce the idea of a thoughtful, or prayerful depth as a part of his self-branding. This resonates with the conscious MC role of being someone who can uplift their audience, who, through the ideas that they present (which may be religious) have a balm to offer people who are suffering. This correlates with Ladi6's use of uplift to convey a spiritual identity, but contrasts with Urthboy's lack of spiritual elements.

Yet K'naan's choice to present elements of Islamic culture *is* bold—even hardcore—in the context of the heightened vilification of Muslims since the September 11 terrorist events of 2001 (Garner and Selod). Indeed, his inclusion at the *Arabesque: Arab Arts of the World* festival in 2009 in Washington DC was reported as being popular, due to K'naan's "message of reframing the limited perception of Arab cultures in North America" (rcinet.ca). Such "reframing" is seen in the calligraphy of his logo which presents Islamic

“refinement” every time it is deployed, such as in the poster for *The Dusty Foot On the Road* already discussed, and here in *The Dusty Foot Philosopher* cover booklet (Schimmel and Rivolta 3). Reframing negative perceptions of Muslim through onstage performance and comments, and graphic elements in his cover art are both forms of public, political work. Public commentary at a politicised festival of Arab arts is performance-as-activism that suggests a solidarity with Arab cultures due to having Islamic heritage and the experience of discrimination in common. Presenting pride in Islamic culture in visual form on cover art is not verbal commentary, but is nevertheless a powerful opposition to the Islamophobic messages that circulate in global popular culture (Garner and Selod). However, there are moments when K’naan’s presentation of Muslim identity as refined is contradicted, such as the line “women who give me neck suffer from whiplashes” (K’naan “The Dusty Foot Philosopher”).

K’naan’s display of *tesbih*⁷⁰ (Figure 34) and the inclusion of Muslim dress in his video for the track from *The Dusty Foot Philosopher*, titled “Strugglin’”, also gesture towards the cultural reality of Islamic practice in the Somali-Canadian community, without him necessarily being categorised as an Islamic hip hop proponent.

⁷⁰ Islamic prayer beads.



FIGURE 34. THE DUSTY FOOT PHILOSOPHER COVER BOOKLET. PHOTOGRAPH BY PEDRO ALTUNA.

Wearing *tesbih* suggests that K'naan may present a spiritual message and so be a conscious Muslim MC, which, if seeing the genres as opposed, places him against the gangsta MCs who are characterised as narcissistic and self-interested in Figure 10 in the literature review. Yet there are moments in K'naan's self presentation when *tesbih* is a conscious version of bling; or a personal display of style through jewellery. This further complicates the conscious-gangsta binary drawn in Figure 10.

One such moment occurs in the documentary *4 Real: Kenya* which follows K'naan and his manager Sol Guy visiting slums in Kenya while on location to shoot the video for "Soobax" from *The Dusty Foot Philosopher*. This Kenyan episode is from a documentary series titled *4 Real*, produced by Canadian Television (CTV) and funded by the Canadian government. It was aired in Canada in 2008 and went on to be broadcast on television in several countries around the world, as well as being available as a DVD and online videos (4REAL). Each episode follows celebrities visiting community programs around the world, with the other celebrities including fellow musicians Mos Def, M.I.A and Flea, the bassist

from the Red Hot Chili Peppers (4REAL). Interviews ostensibly show 'how people live for real', and with the community workers whose projects they visit. *4 Real: Kenya* included a behind-the-scenes travelogue of K'naan's time in Nairobi.

The Kenyan episode showcases impressive soccer and garbage-collection "community building programs" and a self-funded medical clinic (4REAL). The garbage collection program includes recycling discarded materials to craft jewellery. In one scene in the documentary, a somewhat bemused slum resident and instigator of a medical clinic looks on as K'naan and his manager Sol Guy buy beads and bracelets from the garbage program to add to the collection they are already wearing. This moment of showing an interest in styling is jarring. In the middle of a conversation about the overwhelming lack of medical services in the slums, the viewer watches as a musician stocks up on personal (and costume) elements. Some funds from these necklaces may have gone to the artisans from one of the community projects, who also sell necklaces as fair trade gifts through the 4 Real website (4REAL). This suggests K'naan is exhibiting a form of political solidarity by obtaining these necklaces, however, there is potential to act on this in a greater capacity such as, for example, linking to and promoting these programs and products through his own platforms.

Just as K'naan presents a personal brand of having 'dusty feet', his chosen accessories suggest a concern with the 'grassroots' or being 'of the people', and so using a conscious MC role in his self-presentation, which is then deployed in a personal brand as images of K'naan wearing beads are globally distributed. Being photographed and filmed in beads or *tesbih* along with contemporary urban wear such as t-shirts, jackets, and pants is another example of the way K'naan's brand mixes elements from different worlds, by bringing together costume items from the secular commodity culture of the West, a community organisation in a refugee camp, and the ancient religious culture of

Islam (as seen in Figure 34). Both beads and tesbih perform a statement of pride and solidarity with marginalised people, with the *tesbih* also conveying a meaning of K'naan having a spiritual practice (or at least looking like he does).

One reading of K'naan's presence in this documentary is that he is exhibiting mixed motivations: he wants to help the refugee slum residents, but his role as a performer with a visible personal brand, which includes a spiritual aspect, confuses the matter. This perspective was put forwarded in a public fight, or a "beef", between K'naan and fellow Black Canadian MC, K-OS. K-OS first criticised K'naan in a verse from K-OS' track, "B-Boy Stance" (K-OS). In it, K-OS calls out K'naan's appearance in *4 Real: Kenya*, where, according to K-OS' lyrics,

They took cameras to Africa for pictures to rhyme
Over; Oh, yes, the great pretenders
Religious entertainers who want to be life savers (K-OS).

Being a "[r]eligious entertainer who want[s] to be [a] life saver" is seen as inauthentic, as "pretending". K'naan responded with a 'diss' in a later track on a hard-to-locate mixtape, the title of which is the insult to K-OS: "The Revolutionary Avocado". The insult is, in K'naan's terms, one of his "funny lines" (hardknocktv). These reciprocal criticisms are couched within MCs 'dissing' each other across their respective tracks. Trading insults with K-OS shows that K'naan's claim to be an authentic spokesperson for Somali refugees is open to critique. Yet the insult of being inauthentic is also a part of a genre resource of hip hop, seen as both MCs made use of the tussle to produce rhymes. In this sense the accusation of K'naan being a "pretender" and not performing political work that is helpful to slum residents is used to further 'one-upmanship' within hip hop.

However, K'naan himself reflects to Sol Guy in the documentary that seeing the community programs made him feel like "we gotta step up to the plate" and emulate those he met, "who are doing more" (4REAL). This suggests that K'naan takes his position as

spokesperson for Somali refugees seriously, and that he has a sincere motivation to help them. However, as pointed out by K-OS, it is not a simple matter if someone with a developed personal brand visits those he wants to 'represent', and takes "cameras over" with him as he does it. Being filmed as the visiting "entertainer", even one who is "religious" and therefore perhaps sincerely motivated by empathy, means that some attention generated for the Kibera slum residents flows back to K'naan's brand. Even if, in Hearn's terms, K'naan's inclusion in this episode is not only "self-promotion singularly focused on attracting attention" for K'naan the musician, attention still returns to K'naan's personal brand, which limits the political statement that was performed by his inclusion in this documentary ("Radical Eclectic" 317). K'naan is the drawcard; his personal brand has gained some cultural value and so seems to "add" cultural value to the episode. His participation in this episode implies that his concern with the lives of Kibera residents is something to emulate. In fact, the meta-narrative that a personal brand is necessary even when performing political work is also implied, as is the idea that a personal brand is valuable and could somehow help others when the attention it attracts can be shared with those that brush the edges of its spotlight. In addition, the political statement of K'naan's solidarity with Kibera residents does not, for example, include critique of arms manufacturers and dealers, those who fund and support the violence in Somalia that so many people fled, or ask whether this documentary is a helpful form of political work for those in the Kibera slum.

The elements of K'naan's religious identity, such as graphic design, a prayerful pose, tesbih and beads, are used in his personal brand. In the 4: *Real* example this invited a criticism of wanting to be a "life-saver", but implicitly, not achieving this aim (K-OS). The elements of a religious identity in K'naan's brand also reverberate with the idea that he is a skilled writer. This literate sensibility works with a positive connotation of

Islamic learnedness and reinforces the importance of writing to Islamic history (Schimmel and Rivolta 3). This is gestured towards in K'naan's own liner notes to *The Dusty Foot Philosopher*:

My childhood ended on my tenth birthday. [typography in original]

A few days earlier, two friends and I had been chosen to stay after school for wash duty. In Somalia, we scripted the Qur'an with ink on an ancient wood slate called Loh, and every late noon our teacher assigned three students to wash the ink off the Lohs in preparation for the next day's lessons. My friends and I talked about the happenings of the country. I relayed how my brother and I had seen four slaughtered donkeys on our way to school that morning. We fired the theories back and forth as to the significance of such a slaughter. "It is an omen of war", said one friend. Everyone knew it was coming. War had already invaded our tongues long before it set fire to the umbilical cords of our ambitions.

As we finished our task and emptied the wash basin, the dirty water parted the sand and revealed what looked like a rotten potato. We took turns examining the object, throwing it back and forth until it began to look less like a potato and more like a grenade. It had come to rest in my hands when the pin slipped out, triggering a strange ticking sound. I threw it as fast and as far as I could. The grenade detonated and took half my school with it. Lucky for us, there had been no one in the school and we were standing so close to the explosion that it had blown over us. Minor scrapes, but we were fine.

Here K'naan displays his abilities as a writer and storyteller by including this self-penned piece in his cover materials in place of usual album dedications and acknowledgements. This childhood scene at school suggests an everyday connection to the history implicated in writing the script of Qur'an, K'naan and his friends are portrayed as naïve, but also as thinkers who "fired the theories back and forth". As a storyteller he has opened with a dramatic statement and then focused in on a description of characters busy with a physical activity, "wash[ing] the ink off the Lohs". This provides access to K'naan's memory while also suggesting a pride in his literate cultural heritage.

Here K'naan shows his ability to be poetic; "[w]ar had already invaded our tongues long before it set fire to the umbilical cords of our ambitions". Indeed, the fact that he wrote these liner notes in his second language, almost as a micro-fiction, feeds into his self-branding as a learned, articulate wordsmith. This contrasts with the gangsta rapper stereotype of someone more interested in drug-dealing and boasting of the sexual

domination of 'hos' (Figure 10). Presenting himself and his childhood friends as articulate and "fir[ing] theories" valorises them as the dusty foot philosophers, and is political work in the sense of presenting a marginalised identity position.

The second half of K'naan's notes more fully serves to introduce his brand, his heritage, and the mix of knowing violence and being "articulate":

But it was over the next few years that things got really tough in Mogadishu. At the age of eleven, three of my closest friends were shot to death in one day. My thirteen year old brother was arrested for blowing up a federal court. He was sentenced to death but escaped the night before he was to face the firing squad. We spent our days running the streets. Mogadishu had more guns than it did people, and you knew it because everyone was getting shot.

I began to doubt life's intentions for me. I felt overpowered by a consuming fire that I was too little to hold back. I could no longer imagine a different world, nor could I justify my dreams. It is to these very moments of helplessness that I dedicate this album. To all moments of powerlessness. To all moments when justice snubs us. To my mother's perseverance. And finally, to my friends who have perished with bullets in their skin. To the articulate gangsters, the survivalists, the true The Dusty Foot Philosophers.

Here K'naan extends his personal brand with "all" who have known "justice[s] snub", to all who philosophise (are "articulate"), survive, and know the "dust". Instead of a long list of shout-outs naming (and name-dropping) fellow artists, crew, or producers seen in many liner notes, K'naan has chosen to give the people he dedicates the album to poetic descriptions that leave them anonymous. This avoids a list of names becoming tedious or indulgent, and is another example of K'naan using the conscious MC role—inspiring his audience/readers through language—in his personal branding, of which these liner notes form a part. The networks invoked in this piece place him as identifying *with*, and ing for the identification *from*, an imagined, abstracted community of unrecognised, unpublished, and poor thinkers. This is a clear claim to being a spokesperson, one of the attributes of the conscious MC. His decision to include 'a piece of writing' as opposed to the usual form of acknowledgements reinforces his branding as a poet, which is a political stance as a refugee.

K'naan takes on the position of speaking for others, or 'representing' while also paying them homage: "to my friends who have perished with bullets in their skin". K'naan's story, as presented in these liner notes, is part of the brand he uses as a solo MC, and is an opportunity to pay others homage and display humility. This reinforces K'naan's self-branding as a messenger who is serving others through his performance. Calling up the memories of dead childhood friends reinforces the 'feel' of a personal, spiritual purpose as in K'naan's brand. This personal 'feel', or the apparently "unique" qualities that form a personal brand statement, is one of tender homage and sincerity of intent, which is made explicit in the use of memories of childhood friends (Arruda). Having known suffering, and purporting to represent others who have also ("to all moments of powerlessness"), suggests that K'naan's sincere intent as their representative is at stake in the album, as he dedicates the entire album to them. In this album dedication, the ominous atmosphere of the brink of war exists alongside the abstract notions of helplessness and powerlessness, which reinforces the other important aspect of his brand found in *The Dusty Foot Philosopher* album's music, lyrics, and promotion: that of being hardcore and knowing violence. K'naan's self-branding as an articulate poet and a philosophical rapper, who is nevertheless hardcore as he highlights violence and bold as he presents Islamic cultural elements underwent a radical shift in 2010.

Celebration Mix?

This articulate, yet hardcore personal brand of K'naan's early work differs to that displayed in his later performances of "Wavin' Flag". The most prominent example of a refugee hip hop artist achieving visibility is found in the multiple versions of this track, and K'naan has been seen as "one of the most prominent spokesmen for the figure of the

political refugee in popular culture” (Sobral 23). Indeed, the versions of “Wavin’ Flag” that were re-worked after the album version in 2008, to be released in 2010, are an exceptional multi-platform marketing coup for a conscious hip hop artist. These versions draw on the notion of a global community. However, the idea that performing human unity results in political critique is questionable. Conscious hip hop’s claim to speak ‘for’ people through music performance has a formidable task, if it is to truly speak for ‘all’.

The original version of “Wavin’ Flag” was a single on K’naan’s 2008 album, *Troubadour*. On February 18th, 2010, a ‘supergroup’ of Young (Canadian) Artists for Haiti recorded and filmed another version of the track as a charity single to raise funds for recovery efforts after an earthquake in Haiti. The track has been credited with raising “over \$2 million for disaster relief” which was distributed to the organisations Free the Children, War Child Canada and World Vision Canada for Haiti (Young Artists for Haiti). The track won the Canadian Juno Award in 2011 for Single of the Year (Nimbus School of Recording and Media). As of February 2011, the YouTube video of the single had 12,556,473 hits, and The Young Artists for Haiti Facebook page had 118,651 fans (Young Artists for Haiti “Wavin’ Flag, “Buy Now!”). The Young Artists for Haiti version of “Wavin’ Flag” was also number one in the Canadian Hot 100 chart for six weeks in 2010 (Billboard “Billboard Canadian Hot 100”).

The rhythm of the track is that of standard 4/4 pop, at a standard tempo. The execution of both the lyrics and the melody is safely within the expected norms of contemporary Western pop. In contrast to the production of earlier K’naan tracks which used hip hop bass beats, samples, *mbira*⁷¹, hand drums and water drumming, here the African instrumentation found in many tracks on *The Dusty Foot Philosopher*, particularly the live versions in *The Dusty Foot On the Road*, is absent. A previous example of an

⁷¹ Tuned percussion instrument or ‘thumb piano’.

artist changing musical style, attributed to a “commercial motivation” to enter new markets, is Bob Marley, who blended rhythm and blues, rock and reggae (Negus *Producing Pop* 76). This may be surprising, seeing that Marley is broadly associated with Jamaican reggae, yet his musical blending meant that his music became “accessible to various audiences across the world” (Negus *Producing Pop* 76). It may also be the case that this blending was a strategy of Marley’s to bring his political message to new audiences.

There is also a simplicity to K’naan’s songwriting in *Wavin’ Flag*, which reflects its origins. The song was written by K’naan as a child for a school performance in Canada, according to his subsequent children’s book, *When I Get Older: The Story Behind “Wavin’ Flag”* (which is credited as being authored “with” his manager, Sol Guy, and illustrated by Rudy Gutierrez) (K’naan, Sol Guy, and Rudy Gutierrez). The creative origin of the track, recounted in the book, was K’naan’s grandfather giving him some lines of poetry as K’naan, his mother and his brother left Somalia as refugees, leaving the grandfather behind (K’naan, Sol Guy, and Rudy Gutierrez). These lines are given the power of something for the travelling boy to emotionally hold onto while seeking refuge in exile.

Those lines make up the chorus:

When I get older
I will be stronger
They’ll call me freedom
Just like a wavin’ flag (K’naan “Wavin’ Flag”).

The grandfather’s lines became the child’s song, and later the adult K’naan’s track. K’naan then lent the use of the song to the charity supergroup, who were brought together by producer Bob Ezrin (Nimbus School of Recording and Media). The grandfather’s aspiration of freedom for his family and Somalis more broadly become a child’s sweet performance to be applauded, which was then used by several commercial artists to ‘sing

for' earthquake victims. The narrative of taking meaningful lines of poetry to a new country shows malleability; and the message itself can travel even further.

The musical drift towards 'safer' pop in "Wavin' Flag for Haiti" changes K'naan's previous self-branding as hardcore, both stylistically and in terms of his subject matter. K'naan says in the video for the "Young Artists for Haiti - Wavin' Flag" video; "it started out as my song ... but then it became their song, all of these artists' song ... and now it really is going to be Haiti's song" (Young Artists for Haiti VEVO). K'naan says in the 'making of video' for the music video, "as artists we're helping the way we know how" (Young Artists for Haiti VEVO "Behind the Scenes"). However, the questions of whether 'the Haitians' want this song to be theirs, whether others singing a song is the sort of help that they want, and even if they want to be helped without being asked are not asked. Haitians do not contribute lyrics, and are not involved in the production. We do not hear them speak about their experiences, or what they need after the disaster. We do not hear about their relationship with the aid agencies that are to ostensibly help them, or about how this aid was chosen by K'naan's team. The charity single model is patronising and silencing in these ways.

This model has a history: the strategy of gathering a so-called supergroup to perform in 'issue' videos and tracks is not new. A precursor is the benefit concert 'for Bangladesh' organised by Ravi Shankar and George Harrison in 1971. The Band Aid track from 1984, "Do They Know It's Christmas", was followed by the 1985 "We Are the World" anthem by USA Artists for Africa. 1985 also saw Live Aid concerts, which inspired the Farm Aid concert to benefit American farmers, which is still continued by Willie Nelson. Live 8 concerts also occurred in 2005, to mark twenty years since Live Aid. Many more examples of charity concerts, tracks and compilations can be found. These include Ladi6 performing and recording for charities after the (2010) Christchurch earthquake in

Aotearoa-New Zealand (V. Anderson; New Zealand Music Commission; Summer Starter) and Urthboy performing for a project to benefit refugees in Australia (Urthboy and Group 120). The association between music recordings, videos, and concerts and charitable causes is well established.

The producer of the Young Artists for Haiti single, Bob Ezrin, is given the credit of being the instigator of the supergroup (Nimbus School of Recording and Media). Nevertheless, K'naan's 'loaning' of his song means that his brand as a conscious MC who is aware of others' suffering is reinforced through the Young Artists for Haiti version of "Wavin' Flag". This charitable-musician role has a precursor in the figure of Bob Geldof. Geldof co-founded Live Aid, Band Aid, and Live 8. This musician-humanitarian-celebrity has been lauded as a visionary leader, who "succeeded in initiating global action through the skilful juxtaposition of structures and processes from the music industry to the aid context" (Westley 1011).

However, like Geldof, K'naan's choice to lend his 'star power' to a charity product is also a promotion of the charitable aspect of his own brand as a conscious MC. This makes him vulnerable to the criticisms that have been associated with such fundraising efforts. One objection is that the spotlight intended to shine on an 'issue' instead shines on the musician-humanitarians. Mixing the heightened visibility of a celebrity with a 'cause' can obscure the real 'issue', and its real-world complexity. In the meantime, performers and their audiences experience the instant reassurance of *performing charitably*.

Fans receive attention for their own charity (such as seeing a car displaying the "I waved a flag for Haiti" bumper sticker drive by). Attention also flows to the musicians, as seen in the video for "Wavin' Flag for Haiti". The video is weighted much more heavily towards the performers than the charity recipients, with a third of the video displaying

images of anonymous Haitians, often in split-screen with the singers. Moreover, the 'behind the scenes' video for the charity single runs at almost eight minutes, where the single itself is four minutes. The artists are placed as exceptional, and recognisable, whose charitable motivations are (apparently) interesting, while the Haitians are voiceless and anonymous.

In a similar fashion, K'naan's official website promotes charities that work in his homeland (Figure 35).



FIGURE 35. SCREENSHOT, K'NAAN'S OFFICIAL WEBSITE (A&MOCTONE "K'NAAN MUSIC").

Here, fans can interact with K'naan's brand by joining the "I Am a Star" project in order to be charitable to children in Somalia. Helping others is here defined as a fan performing online activism which uses K'naan's personal brand, and therefore also 'being a star'. Fans can further their own personal brands by sharing the news of their charitable action on social media, which also boosts K'naan's personal brand, and implicitly emulates

his 'star' behaviour. Some benefit may flow to "children in Somalia", but attention is returned to K'naan's conscious MC brand in doing so.

The visibility and uncanny strangeness of a celebrity lending their branded self to an 'issue' is also seen when K'naan visited the Daadaab refugee camps in Kenya during the 2011 drought, famine, and unrest (this is distinct from his visit to the Kibera slum in 2008) (Figure 36).



FIGURE 36. K'NAAN VISITING SOMALI REFUGEES IN KENYA (SAPA-DPA).

K'naan and the assembled refugees may have had a genuine interpersonal exchange. Nevertheless, the very act of photographing and distributing the framed shot draws the eye to the visiting musician: he is the story, the refugees are the backdrop or the 'situation'. Even if K'naan sits on the ground, symbolically at the same level, to his fellow Somali refugees, they do not possess the same "meta-narrative" of a personal brand (Hearn "Radical Eclectic" 198). Regardless of the experience for those in the picture, this photograph becomes another part of an overarching personal brand of K'naan's. It reinforces that he is more visible, due to his more recognisable face, and the very fact that his visit, along with Bono's, was a news story (AFP; SAPA-DPA).

It is true that, unlike other celebrities such as Bono or Angelina Jolie, who also make publicised visits and talk to victims of civil war, famine, and disease, K'naan's personal brand has been overtly built on the experience of having "had poverty to feed my flesh" and coming from a place where "infants are nailed" (K'naan "Wash It Down", "My Old Home"). Initially, then, it seems that K'naan is able to leverage a claim to authenticity, as he himself claims a position of also having known deep suffering, and therefore being a more congruent figure to give charity to others in a similar position. This chimes with the analysis of Simon Frith of folk singers such as Bob Dylan in the 1960s, whose authenticity was judged on the criteria that he had to "experience the feelings that lie behind his art" (Frith 32). In addition, K'naan's identity as a Black man also suggests that perhaps worst aspects of a racialised, patronising performance of charity as enacted by some White people could be absent in his case (GurlGoesToAfrica).

These kinds of claims to K'naan's authenticity as a visible charity figure are made complex by the appearance of the White pop stars, such as Justin Bieber, in the "Wavin' Flag for Haiti" video (Figure 37).



FIGURE 37. SCREENSHOT, "YOUNG ARTISTS FOR HAITI - WAVIN' FLAG".

As indicated in the set, the lighting, and the absence of interaction with other artists, Bieber seems to have recorded his spot on the track in a different location to the gathering of the 'supergroup'. The appearance of Justin Bieber is given prime position in the structure of the song. He performs the last repetition of the chorus, with the music reduced to a hushed piano accompaniment that then swells with the addition of strings. This seems designed to engender a moment of awe: *they even got Justin Bieber*.

Both Avril Lavigne, who also appears, and Justin Bieber were marketed as teenage 'discoveries' in contrast to K'naan building his brand earlier in his career as one who knows the experience of "struggling ... fighting to eat" (K'naan "Strugglin"). Their personal brands do not include the personal testimony of suffering in the way that K'naan's does. Artists such as Lavigne and Bieber may also be aware that they will be compared with artists whose vocal styles have been deemed iconic and instantly recognisable who have also performed in charity singles, such as Michael Jackson and Ray Charles, from the landmark USA for Africa 'supergroup' (USA for Africa). The artists in "Wavin' Flag for Haiti" therefore seem to be reaching to display such distinctiveness. The lines they are assigned are executed in R 'n' B, pop, indie or country styles respectively. Many artists 'milk' their one or two featured lines; they seem to 'ham it up'. These artists are White, and so not ethnically marked in the way that Somali refugees are; they have not previously communicated that they know great suffering on par with that of refugees; and their performances can be read as inauthentic displays of emotion. It seems that K'naan may be more 'authentic' in his role as a charitable musician.

However, authenticity does not change the process of self-branding, which itself limits political critique. That is, the "Wavin' Flag for Haiti" single, video, and bumper sticker, K'naan's website, and the press photograph above, all demonstrate that even if

K'naan seeks to direct attention to others, such as earthquake victims and fellow refugees, the logic of self-branding means that attention is collapsed back onto him. The definition of self-branding articulated by Alison Hearn of “an outer-directed form of self-promotion singularly focused on attracting attention and acquiring cultural and monetary value” may seem like an inaccurate fit with the examples of “Wavin' Flag for Haiti” and K'naan being photographed while talking to refugees (“Radical Eclectic” 317). However, the definition is still applicable, because even as K'naan is *not* “singularly focused on attracting attention” to himself, he still “acquir[es] cultural ... value”, that is, in Gandini's terms, his “reputation” or “social capital” is increased, especially if his personal brand is that he *is* conscious of other people's plight (Hearn “Radical Eclectic” 317; Gandini 125). The conscious personal brand in fact intervenes in the flow of attention (and hopefully, concrete help) to those who K'naan aims to help.

In this way K'naan's performance in Young Artists for Haiti's “Wavin' Flag” is also open to the criticisms levelled at other celebrity humanitarians such as Bob Geldof or Bono. While the phenomenon of a rich, White musician such as Bono or Bob Geldof (or Justin Bieber or Avril Lavigne) ‘performing’ the pain of someone less fortunate has become an object of ridicule⁷², the fact that K'naan is Somali does not exclude him this criticism. If a “humanitarian celebrity” such as the founder of *Médecins Sans Frontières*, Bernard Kouchner, can be criticized because his “hunger for publicity frequently gets the better of his professional judgement”, such as when, “[i]n 1992 he carried a sack of grain up a Mogadishu beach for the cameras” ‘waving a flag for Haiti’ can be seen as K'naan's personal brand similarly benefitting from a public gesture (de Waal 54).

Very shortly after the “Young Artists for Haiti” release in February 2010, an array of other versions of “Wavin' Flag” were released. These “Celebration Mixes” were used by

⁷² A joke goes as follows: In a stadium concert full of fans clapping on a pulse, Bono says, “every time I clap my hands a child dies”. An audience member yells: “then stop clapping!”

Coca-Cola as (different flavours, if you will, of) their marketing anthem for advertisements played throughout the coverage of the FIFA 2010 World Cup, the four-yearly international football⁷³ competition. Many bi-lingual and country-specific versions of these “Celebration Mixes” were also produced, such the “Spanish Celebration Mix”, which sees K’naan singing with Spanish pop star David Bisbal. These pop performances of global unity—for advertisements—were also available for purchase as a remixed single of K’naan’s. These were popular: K’naan’s “Wavin’ Flag (Celebration Mix)” reached number one in Germany, Australia and Switzerland, and number two in Canada and Ireland. All of these versions were available at the same time, and can be watched online. The preparation, marketing, and shooting of the mixes and videos for the “Celebration Mixes” was in progress when the “Young Artists for Haiti” initiative happened. Therefore, the charitable effort was knowingly placed as a precursor to K’naan’s FIFA involvement.

The lyrics of “Wavin’ Flag” are simplified and edited in the “Celebration Mixes”. The many bi-lingual versions have slight differences, but in all, the most prominent part of the song is the chorus, which was originally K’naan’s grandfather’s lines,

When I get older
I will be stronger
They’ll call me freedom
Just like a wavin’ flag

For Coca-Cola, K’naan’s original version of “Wavin’ Flag” was incongruous with the campaign for the World Cup, due to references to poverty (Billboard Magazine “How K’naan’s song”; Haupt *Static* 188). In fact, while we may not know how exactly the conversation between Coca-Cola, K’naan, and his management played out, it has been reported that, “[t]o the corporation’s credit, they asked him if he really wanted to use such

⁷³ Soccer.

a personal song in a commercial enterprise. He suggested rewriting it" (Churchill).

According to a quote attributed to A&M Octone CEO/President, James Diener,

For its part, Coca-Cola loved the song but noted that lyrical references to "a violent prone, poor people zone" and people "struggling, fighting to eat" didn't fit the campaign's themes. "The crucial moment in the discussion came when K'Naan said, 'I can take that song, refashion some of the lyrics and give you an exclusive version,' " Diener says. "That's an attempt on K'Naan's part to revitalize the song in the spirit of the World Cup" (Billboard Magazine "How K'naan's song").

The euphemistic use of "revitalize" is telling: of course this is K'naan's (profitable) prerogative to allow his track to be used in this way, as he says, it is "his music" (Billboard Magazine "How K'naan's song"). Yet, the question of ownership is more complex than his rights as a songwriter, as the licensing of the song is a deal made between A&M Octone and Coca-Cola, and K'naan had already 'loaned' the song to the cause of Young Artists for Haiti's fundraising. As pointed to in this piece from Billboard Magazine, K'naan's choice is made within high-level corporate negotiations about the licensing of a track (and K'naan's many subsequent media appearances and international performances associated with it). K'naan himself reflected that "I might be the best marketer of the whole group involved" (in the discussions to use "Wavin' Flag") (Fast Company Staff).

"Revitalizing" means, in fact, omitting references to those suffering multiple traumas, violence, drought and displacement. Therefore "Wavin' Flag's" message of being optimistic *in spite of* trauma is weakened when the references to trauma are removed. Instead, in the Coca-Cola and FIFA 'exclusive' versions, the hopeful chorus is all-important—in fact, it is almost all of the song. This hopeful message is generic enough to be used for Coca-Cola and FIFA's cross-branding purposes. Coke's brand statement is "happiness", and this was to be emphasised in the World Cup campaign, as described by the global director of worldwide sports and entertainment marketing at Coca-Cola:

Happiness and optimism ... like all that singing on a hill in the middle of the crises of the 1970s. For the World Cup, we decided to tell a story of happiness through

an African lens — if that helped change the perception of the continent, that would be even better (Fast Company Staff).

The celebration of hope (and Coke, and football) in the accompanying concerts and release of videos and singles of the “Celebration Mixes” can be uplifting for some.

Repeating and referencing nationalistic displays such as body paint, singing together and flag-waving in K'naan's track puts some—boys—briefly in the international limelight, who then ‘wave their flag’. For example, many brown-skinned boys were selected to be flag-waving, synchronised dancers in the front of the audience at K'naan's performance of “Wavin' Flag” at the FIFA Opening Concert in South Africa. As in some conscious hip hop, pride is here depicted as a transformative force that those witnessing it can celebrate. This presents marginalised identities in a public way, and so it is a political act.

However, this is complicated by the fact that the track is an anthem of hope rather than a real experience of truly being “called freedom” by being free of war and poverty. Enacting a unity and equality across ethnic difference substitutes for implementing that unity in real life, or indeed, for addressing injustice or striving for equal rights as political subjects, which could truly signal ‘unity’. In this way, K'naan's promotion of hope and “happiness” is synergistic with both FIFA and Coca-Cola's brands, and means that the “Celebration Mixes” are not politically critical. Hope is, in fact, a quality that has been attributed to some conscious MCs (Figure 10), which in fact made K'naan's co-option into this internationally prominent pop effort seamless. In *4 Real: Kenya*, K'naan reflects

Poverty is the bitterest thing. And hope is the sweetest thing that a soul can bear. And no hope is more pure than that which is in poverty. And I see that in these kids and it's amazing, man. It's there in passion and its there in beauty and its there in sports, so ... although there's a lot to be done, there's a lot of beauty (4REAL) [sic].

However, the malleability of the hope for a better day in the “Celebration Mixes”, together with the decision to edit out the song’s references to trauma, means that it is easy (in fact, required) to ignore the suffering of others amidst the emotive heights of celebration. The ‘global’ (or at least international) nature of the single and the fact that it had so many different bi-lingual versions places it as an ‘everyman’ anthem. This demonstrates that a desire for universal unity, for ‘oneness’, is exploited in global sporting events and the songs associated with them, such as the “Celebration Mixes”. At the World Cup, “this services the lie that the event is open to all subjects”, which it is not (Haupt *Static* 197).

For example, the video for the “Spanish Celebration Mix” with David Bisbal includes slow motion, spectacularly coloured scenes of cheering, ecstatic, worried, and then hopeful football supporters in a variety of national team colours (Figure 38).



FIGURE 38. SCREENSHOT, “WAVIN’ FLAG: SPANISH CELEBRATION MIX”.

This representation of ‘everyone’ is exclusive and works to normalise certain identities. That is, heterosexual, ‘good looking’, able-bodied, and slim. It also normalises that patriotic sports fandom is the natural use of passion, energy, and leisure time. This is a narrow ‘world’ indeed. It has been argued that in *The Dusty Foot Philosopher* album,

"K'naan's work ... stands as an important symbol of an emerging world culture" (Sobral 34). In the "Celebration Mixes", this world culture is centred around football spectatorship by individuals who embody the idea of nationalistic competition (by applying body paint in team colours, for example). Absent from the 'global party' here is the sense conveyed in *The Dusty Foot Philosopher*, that "the actual "curse" that befell Somalia is the result of colonial and neocolonial practices that involve, directly or indirectly, all the inhabitants of the Western world" (Sobral 33). When "the inhabitants of the Western world" are pictured as happily cheering for their country's sportsmen while K'naan sings, their implication in the "curse" of "colonial and neocolonial practices" is lost.

And what of those who don't join the FIFA party? They are out of the frame in this effort, as they would ruin the hopeful message and its saleability for the corporate sponsors. The emphasis on hope excludes K'naan's former messages of critical thought and being scarred by hardship. This means that those he was formerly 'representing', and their suffering, are also excluded. Sobral stated that "In The Beginning", "Hoobaale", and "The African Way" from *The Dusty Foot Philosopher* contained K'naan's "philosophical reflections about the role of poets, as well as observations about the critical state of the world the bard must implicitly oppose" (30). These reflections are not found in the "Wavin' Flag Celebration Mixes". K'naan is not implicitly or explicitly opposing the "critical state of the world"; he is instead celebrating 'with the world'. The political critique that K'naan had already performed in *The Dusty Foot Philosopher*, and his branding as someone who bears the 'hardcore' news of the suffering of Somalis and refugees is contradicted.

This generic, celebratory message in the "Wavin' Flag Celebration Mixes" that were produced for the World Cup prompted a blogger and former K'naan fan to vent,

The song went from one about the aspirations of a child stricken with poverty in a war-torn country to one espousing love for a sport with the most nauseatingly cheesy lyrics ever. In about 7 languages" (Sana).

The upbeat, anthemic (or “nauseatingly cheesy”) versions for the World Cup remove the references K’naan may have been making about being a child in war-torn Mogadishu, to instead be easily associated with any boy’s soccer-playing dream (K’naanVEVO). As the same blogger points out, there is an irony in celebrating sport, which may be a part of “rehabilitation” for children in former war zones, in a song that originally was about holding on for a day free of war in the first place (Sana).

Further, the nationalism portrayed through the song and its accompanying videos for The World Cup can be a source of conflict for different groups, in a song “which first spoke of the struggles of never-ending war and poverty” (Sana). The invocation of nationalistic football fans “imagin[ing] communities” that are in competition for a soccer trophy is not seen as positive by some (Anderson). On an online discussion board, one user rants against the nationalism in the song:

most of the world is poor and oppressed and has a ****ty, completely freedom-devoid life, usually because of their governments who wave around their flags in some false obsession with nationalism so i almost feel like the moron that wrote this song unintentionally created a form of mindless propaganda for the masses to repeat to themselves during the world cup (IGN).

This forum commenter points out that “most of the world” has a “completely freedom-devoid life” (IGN). This reinforces the picture K’naan previously presented in the track “In The Beginning” from *The Dusty Foot Philosopher* album, as read by Sobral: “[s]ince it seems totally absent in reality, freedom can exist only as a question mark—suggesting an unfulfilled promise, as well as a demand (31). Yet in the “Wavin’ Flag Celebration Mix”, it is suggested that the freedom *is* being experienced ‘by everyone’ through the nationalistic waving of flags to support soccer teams. For this forum writer, this means that K’naan (the writer of the song) is a “moron” (IGN). In this instance, K’naan’s established self-branding as articulate is broken.

For some other users in the same forum, K'naan is not a "moron" because he previously produced thoughtful work and experienced suffering, so a hopeful message is his to disseminate if he wants to (IGN). For another blogger, the disappointment in K'naan centres on the fact that he destroyed his personal brand of being articulate and hardcore, of being a "favourite poet ... with a strong Somali background and consciousness of the country's politics", who instead became a "sold out" worker for Coke and FIFA (Sana). For this writer, K'naan's song is "Coked out", that is, the original meaning about hardship and violence is removed leaving a hopeful anthem with "kiddish simplicity" and "weaksauce lyrics" (Sana). "Weaksauce" suggests a betrayal, or feminising, of being 'hardcore', or having a previously uncompromising voice that has masculine attributes. The fact that K'naan offered to change his lyrics, that he offered up his poetic voice, in order to make a licensing transaction, is singled out as a betrayal by some fans, who publicise and analyse the contrast in the lyrics that were in the original version, and the lyrics that remain for the World Cup versions (Churchill; Sana). Stripping the following lyrics, or the "meat" of the song "beyond the chorus" is highlighted (Churchill):

So many wars, settlin' scores
 Bringin' us promises, leavin' us poor
 I heard 'em say, love is the way
 Love is the answer, that's what they say

But look how they treat us
 Make us believers,
 We fight their battles
 Then they deceive us

Tried to control us
 They couldn't hold us
 Cuz we just moved forward
 Like Buffalo Soldiers

But we strugglin',
 Fightin' to eat

And we wonderin',
When we'll be free

So we patiently wait
For that fateful day
It's not far away,
But for now we say...

In this original version, these verses lead into the chorus, giving it a bittersweet edge. Holding on for the “fateful day” of waving a flag in freedom is a statement of tenacity, rather than an amorphous celebration of sport as somehow equalling “freedom”.

As well as the change in lyrics, the change in who K'naan's brand ostensibly represents is criticised, so much that one former fan directly states, “I will never, ever forgive K'naan for selling out so hardcore. To Coca Cola. NEVER, K'NAAN, NEVER” (Sana). K'naan's act of *selling* is “hardcore”, because Coca Cola is a “evil ... [a] gargantuan” company, and K'naan's brand was meant to represent people suffering without a platform to have their message heard (Sana). “Wavin' Flag's” simple melody and message of hope were saleable, but the reality of war needed to be edited out for K'naan to access the large platform made possible through the cross-branding effort. This weakens his previous self-branding which suggested that being a poet bringing a message ‘from’ a war-torn area was central to brand K'naan.

However, the aspects of K'naan's brand that made use of his Black male body and face were acceptable for these corporations to work with, in order to represent the idea that they were celebrating ‘the world's game in Africa’. The synergy between football and popular music and the heroic individual male figure make marketing sense, and even associates a sugary beverage with physical activity by fit people. The popularity of football in developing countries, and the established mythology of reaching heroic heights of fame and riches through being a feted player nevertheless privilege exceptional boys and young

men, which is far from lifting 'us all' out of poverty and exploitation. Indeed, this contrasts sharply with the human trafficking of women for sex which followed from the World Cup's presence in South Africa (Haupt *Static* 206-7).

But from the perspective of Coca-Cola and K'naan's record label (A&MOctone, a part of Universal), using a musician in their cross-branding deal to coincide with the World Cup was a success. The executives of Coca-Cola and Universal were quoted as seeing the potential to work with other artists in this way, as an executive of Coca-Cola commented, "I'd like to change the way we work with the music industry, in a true, collaborative way, trying to reinvent the way brands can be a key player [in the careers of musicians]" (Billboard Magazine "How K'naan"). This places these companies as collaborators, destabilising the idea that a musician is an author, and therefore that "Wavin' Flag" is indeed still 'K'naan's song'. From this perspective, "being a key player" or a collaborator in a musician's career in order to increase the profitability of the cross-branding arrangement trumped K'naan's previous personal brand as articulate and hardcore. From the Coca-Cola executive's perspective, campaigns such as Coca-Cola's "Celebration Mixes" guarantee artists a large international audience, and are therefore successful, regardless of the impact on the musician's personal brand that has already been established (Billboard Magazine "How K'naan").

One critic also perceived the campaign as a success, framing the cross-branding deal as savvy from K'naan's perspective. To this critic, the original version of "Wavin' Flag" is still "on the shelf", so K'naan is not solely associated with Coca-Cola. This is contrasted with the band The Psychedelic Furs, who licensed their song "Pretty in Pink" to the teenage movie of the same name, and yet, "where are they now?" (Churchill). Written in 2010 at the height of "Wavin' Flag's" popularity, this comparison may seem to make a meaningful distinction. Since that time, however, K'naan's popularity has waned. It seems

that, just like the “cult fan base” of The Psychedelic Furs who felt betrayed and so deserted the band, K’naan’s “choice” to enter into the cross-branding deal can also be read in this way, “as capitulation to hegemony” (Churchill; Haupt *Static* 188). A parallel has also been drawn between K’naan appealing to a “mainstream” audience in the “Celebration Mixes” and George Benson, an

[a]ccclaimed jazz heavyweight until he signed with Warner in the mid-70s and started releasing smooth jazz albums. Hardcore jazz fans went WTF?, but the R&B and pop fans who’d never heard of him until then – and they vastly outnumbered the serious jazz fans – went wow! This is awesome! (Jabbar).

Artists need not stay the same forever, or play to the same audiences forever. This example of fans mobilising a distinction about George Benson’s authenticity is fraught, and the same can be said to those who feel that K’naan lost his authenticity. It is worth keeping in mind that authenticity is subjective, and has no definitive answer. An argument can be mounted that, like Benson’s “smooth jazz”, K’naan is free to change his style and themes, that he does not need to always be defined by “strugglin” as a refugee or referring to the “hardcore” violence in Somalia (K’naan “Strugglin”, “What’s Hardcore”). K’naan reflected on the “Celebration Mixes” deal;

It might sound arrogant or stupid ... but I feel so outrageously authentic at what I do that the question of selling out or not selling out doesn't even enter my head. I think people who worry about this must already be worried about their true credibility. I'm just interested in, How do we get my message out? (Fast Company Staff)[sic].

However, the attributes of being articulate and hardcore were key elements of K’naan’s personal brand. Personal brands can be changed so much that they are weakened, which results in confusion. K’naan’s self-branding pointed to the fact that he was a conscious MC, that is, a spokesperson for other people’s suffering: he even dedicated his first album to the memory of childhood friends. Hip hop was also central to his personal brand, as he took on the whole notion of being a hardcore, masculine rapper within his own MC-ing. K’naan’s brand was established as someone who could battle with

lyrics in a 'hardcore' manner, who represented a poetic heritage, whose muses were "music and water", and who claimed the African 'roots' of hip hop with water drumming and his voice. *The Dusty Foot Philosopher* included tracks with African instrumentation, and many of them, such as "Strugglin'", "Soobax", "What's Hardcore", and "Wash It Down", had a jarring, anxious tone. In contrast, the "Celebration Mixes" have musically been said to be "Afrobeat and North American pop" (the Afrobeat inclusion is highly questionable), or else just pop (Churchill). As voiced by a reviewer user of a discussion board, that "annoyingly catchy poppy piece of ****", "Wavin' Flag", negates K'naan's former efforts to include African instrumentation and rhythms in *The Dusty Foot Philosopher*, instead, its simplicity and predictability is "annoying" (IGN). Shifting musical styles in K'naan's case did impact his self-branding as a conscious, poet-MC.

For Sobral, K'naan's biography was distinctive:

Apart from his obvious skills as a lyricist and performer, the events of his biography that preceded his career as an emcee in North America are what really distinguish him from his rap contemporaries (22).

Yet lyrical and performance skills and "biography" had all been previously funnelled into K'naan's personal brand, and he either simplified or glossed over all three in the "Celebration Mixes". The vague and banal music, images and lyrics of the "Celebration Mixes" confuses his previous branding as a Somali refugee poet and conscious MC.

Indeed, the many versions of this track released in a short period of time are also confusing, as seen in the text accompanying this music video on YouTube (from the official KNaanVEVO channel):

ATTENTION: This is NOT the official video or song of the 2010 FIFA World Cup! Music video by K'naan performing Wavin' Flag. (C) 2010 OctoScope Music, LLC (KNaanVEVO).

This is due to the release of 10 official bi-lingual "Coca-Cola Celebration Mixes" in collaboration with a range of pop stars, which followed K'naan's 'own' "Wavin' Flag", plus

the international version with will.i.am and David Guetta. These celebration mixes were officially linked to Coca-Cola and featured in the Top 10 in charts in several countries. Several other bi-lingual collaborations with international artists were released that were not sponsored by Coca-Cola, but were timed to coincide with the World Cup. Another, “champion edition” of *Troubadour* was released in 2010 to take advantage of the attention from the FIFA campaign, and the Coca-Cola jingle itself with its “five tone cadence” was mixed into the “Celebration Mixes” (Fast Company Staff). In all of these ways, the mixing of Coca-Cola, FIFA and K’naan’s brands makes the idea of this ‘only’ being K’naan’s ‘official’ song as a stand-alone artist questionable. K’naan can comment,

I don't work for Coke or anything; what I do is my music. This was a really great opportunity for them to use my song, without compromising my integrity as a musician. This is what I write, these are the songs I make. I'm happy about it (Billboard Magazine “How K’naan”).

Yet the licensing of the mixes for these cross-branding efforts means that the song, and K’naan’s brand itself, are now associated with Coca-Cola and FIFA, due to the association of the advertising campaign with the World Cup. K’naan toured 20 countries as a part of the World Cup trophy tour, where the song and the World Cup’s physical trophy were both displayed to hundreds of thousands of people (Coca-Cola). He performed on stages blazoned with Coca-Cola flags, and some cover art images of K’naan for the “Celebration Mixes” (then widely distributed online) have the same cover image as *Troubadour*, where K’naan holds his chin, but are fronted by an additional Coca-Cola bottle graphic. This means that, due to the significantly larger reach of these efforts than K’naan’s previous releases, he is associated with this celebratory cross-branding. In addition, by making use of ideas of a global human community (who come together in the name of nationalistic competition), the advertisement-track’s emphasis on individual prowess is more congruous with individual consumption of Coca-Cola than expressing

political awareness of those oppressed by war and poverty. This disrupts K'naan's previous self-branding as conscious.

Another example of the dilution of K'naan's specific self-branding is seen in the execution of the videos for the official bi-lingual versions. The video of the Spanish version with David Bisbal includes generic studio shots with back up dancers, and the two male leads occasionally join their dancers in movements during the chorus. The triangular configuration of dancers with the singers in front has also been repeated in music videos many times, and, in fact, it looks cheap and rushed (perhaps not surprising considering the many commitments K'naan had at the time). The dancers' bodies are sexualised to a degree, even as their movements reflect waving flags, their jewel-coloured leotards feature close-ups of their pelvises. This is tame sexualisation or objectification of female bodies by many music video standards. Nevertheless, using generic shots suggests co-option into the discourse of mainstream music videos and normalises a certain level of objectification of women's bodies within a celebratory anthem ostensibly about football.

The interweaving of K'naan's self-branding with the World Cup's is an example of the malleability of personal brands when employed in conjunction with those of corporations, and fulfils the capitalist logic of conquering new markets or audiences. Considering the "semiotic vulnerability" that K'naan's personal brand is subject to when working with Coca-Cola and FIFA addresses the need for scholars to respond to the "challenge for those individuals who want to maintain their own brand without being subsumed by a company's brand" (Gershon 289). In this case, K'naan's personal brand did not survive the challenge, and was subsumed into those of the corporate brands. It is doubtful that K'naan's personal brand could be "maintained" through this arrangement, as the messages of being articulate and hardcore, versus having fun, being a sports fan, and buying Coca-Cola are at cross-purposes. The 'reach' of the "Wavin' Flag" celebration

mixes was on a much greater scale than his previous work, and Coca-Cola and the World Cup's brands were already much more recognisable than K'naan's.

Further, the officially sanctioned messages of FIFA have been critiqued as not representing the reality of the impact of international sporting events. The World Cup (and the Olympics) have been criticised as not only diverting attention from poverty, but actually not resulting in promised infrastructure and social benefits for the poor in the host countries (Conn). The phenomenon of shuttling homeless people away from high-visibility locations for these events is established (Wilson). Before, during, and after the events, the promised benefit to disadvantaged people, that is, the great nation-building possible through sport, has been questioned. Tax breaks and exemptions are given to corporations such as FIFA who make huge profits off the "product" of the World Cup, while home governments also pay for some of the considerable costs of hosting such games (Haupt *Static* 189). Specifically, the event in South Africa saw the enforcement of "overzealous intellectual property laws, restrictions on free speech and limited opportunities for local communities in terms of trade and securing long-term employment" (Haupt *Static* 189). It is doubtful if this is really 'representing people' and their interests, the apparent aim of conscious hip hop.

In this way, working with FIFA interrupts and in fact runs counter to K'naan's personal MC brand as a conscious messenger of the people, who dedicated *The Dusty Foot Philosopher* to "all moments when justice snubs us". It is true that, like the "corporate personhood" which some job seekers strive for, personal MC brands are ostensibly meant to be "simultaneously recognizable and yet changeable" (Gershon 283). However, this tension needs to be kept and not broken for the sake of either recognisability or changeability. Here, K'naan's previous personal brand is broken; the change is too great.

For Coca-Cola and FIFA, using artists such as K'naan seems to 'brownwash' and seemingly globalise their marketing efforts. In these examples, the "brandalism" that results is not that of a street artist 'culture jamming' a corporate brand's public image, or of 'undesirables' such as chavs hijacking a preferred brand demographic. Rather, the powerful interests of the corporate bodies have in this instance 'brandalised', or weakened, the self-branding that K'naan himself had previously established. K'naan's individual brand, previously stamped as specifically Somali, refugee, and poet, is washed with Coke to be an every-brown-man.

Coca-Cola and FIFA's cynical gesture towards inclusion is associated with K'naan. In fact, critique of K'naan's involvement was executed by Playing Fields Connective, who posted a musical parody of "Wavin' Flag", titled "Wavering Flag" on YouTube and Facebook (Haupt *Static* 4). They use the parody to highlight the problems of hosting the World Cup in South Africa (Haupt *Static* 204-5). K'naan's performance is not explicitly parodied, but the melody and rhythm of "Wavin' Flag" are used to criticise the ultimate imperialism of FIFA's presence in South Africa and the debt incurred by citizens by the government's decision to host the games. "Waving Flag" is criticised as containing an "irony", of "South Africa's borders being open to tourists from the global north" during the World Cup, "whereas African foreigners have been killed and assaulted in xenophobic incidents" within South Africa (Haupt *Static* 204). Implicitly, K'naan 'selling out' to FIFA, and not only to Coca-Cola, is critiqued, as the resources diverted to the World Cup could have been spent on healthcare and education for South Africans. Playing Fields Connective mock K'naan's lyrics to make this point, "When we are older/our children might wonder/why we sold out/in the name of the FIFA flag" (Playing Fields Connective; Haupt *Static* 205).

The Playing Fields Connective has thousands of likes on YouTube, as opposed to the many millions of views of the “Wavin’ Flag” videos, so the parody did not reach the same audience numbers as the official song. However, this is an instance of a production positioning itself as from a ‘people’—a ‘Connective’—concerned about an issue and speaking out about it. The musicians and producers hail from Cape Town and Toronto, which gives a sense of a critical diasporic perspective on the games (Playing Fields Connective). By contrast, K’naan’s brand, including the song, becomes subsumed into FIFA’s, which is included in cartoons shown in the video as a fat, greedy imperialist (Playing Fields Connective). This places K’naan as the one being subject *to* articulate criticism, rather than him being the outsider questioning, for example, representations of violence in US hip hop.

Shortly following the release of the “Celebration Mixes”, K’naan’s turn to a homogenised “hop pop” musical style was reinforced in the July 2010 single, “Bang Bang”⁷⁴ (K’naan feat. Adam Levine). Featuring White male singer, Adam Levine, the chorus is a pure pop melody. In the video, the costume, makeup and production design suggests a professional team. The video features models, mostly Black, whose costume and movement suggests that they are slick beauties of a nightlife world, who aim to pick up K’naan for a night of casual sex. The lyrics give the impetus of the interaction to the women: the opening shot is of a Black woman’s lips wearing glitter lipstick mouthing “I love you”, and the chorus repeats “bang bang, she shot me” (with her look). However, the shots of the women feature close up shots of their legs, bottoms and faces, and their sole actions are posing in their costumes and make up, and doing ‘model’ walks towards the camera or K’naan in towering heels. Here objectifying women and reifying a certain type of beauty and materialism, a standard theme of so much commercial hip hop and pop, is

⁷⁴ “Bang Bang” coincidentally has the same title, but is distinct to, Ladi6’s track.

repeated. One shot, perhaps meant to be comic, shows K'naan bringing a miniature reclined woman into existence and then winking, reminiscent of *I Dream of Jeannie* era images, while another woman and her mirror image 'shoot' him with their look (Figure 39):



FIGURE 39. SCREENSHOT, "BANG BANG".

K'naan is pictured as a styled version of himself, sitting on a couch between two women foregrounded by drinks on a table, and sitting in an armchair wearing headphones as a model struts towards him. The suggests that his fame makes him subject to women's advances. As K'naan's self-branding had included his roles as critical poet who calls out imitative performances of rappers, and who embodies a message of suffering and spirituality, the loss of these elements to a predictable pop effort means that his brand-distinctiveness is also lost.

In one of the videos for the 'international version' of "Wavin' Flag" with will.i.am and White DJ David Guetta, K'naan seems to be celebrating making it as an international star, and he 'waves the flag' of hope that others can also achieve this 'boyish' dream. This seems like a form of uplift and inspiration for marginalised people. Yet, he is merely repeating the themes so familiar with this level of celebrity, without critiquing the gender norms that proliferate there, and by omitting the political message of the suffering of

others. K'naan was always using music to build celebrity, yet in "Wavin' Flag" and "Bang Bang" he is overtly aligned with homogenous themes, music, and video production, and the unsettling political potential of his earlier lyrics and overall branding is absent. In addition, by working with corporate brands in "Wavin' Flag" whose celebratory message excludes many people and also whitewashes complex, structural inequality and the impact of one-off, major international events, the 'edge' previously established in K'naan's personal brand is blunted.

Conclusion

What vibrations are emitted when slum, ghetto, shantytown, favela, project and housing estate rub up against hypercapital? And what kind of harbinger of urban affect do such cultures constitute within contemporary global capitalism?
(Goodman xx)

K'naan's performances move within a music industry that is at once a conduit of "contemporary global capitalism" and a 'speaking for', a 'vibration from', the "slum, ghetto, shantytown, favela, project and housing estate". What, then, of a refugee, evokes his "old home" that "smelt of good birth, red beans, kernel oil and hand-me-down poetry" yet was also a place where "the land vomits ghosts", and then goes on to sing for the hopes of a football fan from Czechoslovakia, Ireland, or Australia, brought to you by Coca-Cola (K'naan "My Old Home")?

The uses of K'naan's personal branding, in particular the narrative of his movement as a refugee from a civil war-torn Somalia to Toronto, to being a figure of an apparently unified 'globe' coming together in events such as the 2010 FIFA World Cup displays such a "rubbing up" of very different places and contexts. His refugee journey and continued narrative of movement have been deployed in promotional and performance capacities to

signal that he is an articulate messenger of the refugee experience. The promotional aspect of this has been indicated in parentheses by Ana Sobral; "K'naan specifically wrote (and marketed) his album as a testimony of the refugee's struggle" (27). In this chapter I have considered how writing, performance *and* marketing all need to be considered simultaneously, without parentheses, because they all feed into K'naan's overarching personal brand of being a refugee representative.

This overarching personal brand or "meta-narrative" mobilises aspects of identity to claim hip hop authenticity, such as being of African heritage (having access to the 'roots' of hip hop) and being a young male MC who is able to perform inventive insults (Hearn "Radical Eclectic" 198). The latter is also used to make a play at ultimate 'hardness' in the masculine arena of hip hop. K'naan raps of having lived around—and implicitly, been formed by—violence as a child, and as having "had poverty to feed my flesh" and literally *embodying* the message of other's suffering (K'naan "Wash It Down"). This suggests that his branding as articulate and hardcore does contain political critique, as he is using the conscious MC role of being aware of other's suffering and is acting as their (self-appointed) spokesperson.

However, the limited logic of authenticity requires that an MC must repeatedly perform their origins of coming from the "hardest, hardest projects⁷⁵" or else be open to the charge of 'selling out' or losing authenticity if they are, for example, instead used as a celebratory figurehead of the global-unity-cum-nationalistic-competition such as the World Cup (K'naan "Strugglin"). K'naan played his representational politics in a literal sense, of performing where he 'came from', and also in an imaginative sense, of reaching to 'the globe', including nationalistic soccer fans and Haitian earthquake victims. K'naan's gesture to 'the globe' was synergistically profitable in an economic sense for major brands

⁷⁵ Public housing.

such as FIFA and Coca-Cola, and of course, for K'naan's own visibility as an artist and the profitability of his record label. However, it meant that 'where he came from', which was a key part of his personal brand, was obscured.

In some of the incarnations of "Wavin' Flag", particularly the "Celebration Mixes", the power of K'naan's distinctive self-branding is lost, as some critics and listeners have agreed (Jabbar). Further, the impact of bringing 'news' of hardship from relatively invisible parts of the world is lost. The video for the "Wavin' Flag" remix with will.i.am and David Guetta celebrates the journey of Black men who have achieved international visibility, by including shots of K'naan walking with a young boy who walks alongside him. This celebrated journey, apparently a reason to 'wave your flag' and exalt in freedom, is open to very few. Indeed, it works to keep many invisible, bound as it is in a system of celebrity privilege, aided by the deployment of personal brands.

This suggests an end-point for a personal brand representing the 'global', and for the twin motivations of 'raising consciousness' and being entertaining in hip hop. The representations of the globe as made up of nationalistic football fans in "Wavin' Flag" negate the sense of representing playful, poor children in Asia and Africa, as their (brief, visually stylised) inclusion is consumed along with Coke and sports coverage (K'naan "Wavin' Flag"). The potential acid of representative politics is diluted by amorphous, 'flag-waving-we' that may as well be waving Coca-Cola bottles as the ultimate emblem of the universal.

Considering a prominent conscious MC such as K'naan highlights the limits that self-branding places on political critique. Even as K'naan sits on the ground and talks with fellow Somalis who are affected by drought, the nature of being a performer who makes use of an overarching personal brand marks him as exceptional. He may seek to emulate

Bob Geldof and fulfil the conscious MC role of representing others, yet even as he sits on the ground with 'his people', the existence of his personal brand returns attention to itself. In an "attention economy" a charity single is also highly commodified, and returns attention to the brands within it (Davenport and Beck). Buying the "Wavin' Flag" bumper sticker or watching the YouTube video with the 'stars' attracts much more, and very short, attention.

This chapter has highlighted the contradiction faced by conscious MCs, that is, the expectation that they speak for 'their people', which can be stretched to include 'the world', while also promoting their individual skills and life narrative in a personal brand, an abstract entity that is "a collection of skills, assets, and alliances that must be continually maintained and enhanced" (Gershon 288). The friction between these imperatives is inherent to the process of self-branding for musicians, as the personal brand competes for visibility with any poetic statements of representation or charity that the MC may make.

Sol Guy, K'naan's (former) manager, asks him on location in Kenya, "How important as a poet, as a Somali poet, is truth to your work?" K'naan replies,

Truth *is* the work. You can't separate that. Life is the expression, truth is what's in life, and you can't separate those ... If you're expression is not truthful, you're giving dead expression, and what's that? That's nothing, you're mumbling, you're sayin' nothing (4REAL).

Conscious hip hop MCs such as K'naan ostensibly write and perform their truth of "life". However, as the vehicle for this performance is the branded self, it is vulnerable to brand hijacking, such as when K'naan's personal brand is attached to mega corporations that celebrate global unity in order to turn a profit, hijacking his former branding as articulate and hardcore. The presence of a personal brand also normalises the idea that individual brands are necessary for success, and that a personal brand has value that may

be shared with others when doing public political work. However, the very function of a personal brand is to attract attention back to the individual.

Further, self-branding *itself* limits artists (and individuals more broadly). That is, “branding people [including performers] involves navigating a tension between the supposed stability of a brand and the longed-for flexibility of a neoliberal self” (Gershon 289). While written about job-seekers, this tension between the flexibility of a neo-liberal self able to move between different employment contexts, yet display a consistent brand, can also apply to an MC seeking different audiences, moving between musical styles, and conveying different messages, while still being fronted by a recognisable ‘brand K’naan’. Self-branding in a neoliberal era is a form that “people can not easily inhabit” (Gershon 281). Even as K’naan followed a trajectory of individual “success”, his vehicle for this, the personal brand, limits his political critique in multiple ways (freethechildrenintl).

Chapter 6: Conclusion

The primary research question of this thesis has been: does self-branding limit the political critique that is ostensibly performed by conscious hip hop MCs? By emphasising self-branding—which includes the images, lyrics, performance, merchandise and online presence of three MCs—I have expanded the scholarly discussion of identity in hip hop. This has shown that a celebrated aspect of conscious MCs—their political critique—is intertwined with the imperative to self-promote.

The case studies in this thesis discussed artists that have moulded personal brands that mix linguistic, musical and other influences from a range of locations, stereotypes and performances. This reinforced the notion that hip hop participants “theorise”, or are reflective about, the location of their self “at the intersection of the local and the global” (Alim “Translocal Style” 105). Ladi6, Urthboy, and K’naan produce self-reflexive personal brands at this intersection.

Reflexivity, or a heightened awareness of presenting a ‘self’ in highly mediated contexts, was seen in these artists’ responses to news media coverage of war, the gangsta rap practice of boasting of a violent life, and other MCs’ hip hop tracks. Other cultural materials utilised in presenting their self-reflexive personal brands ranged from AAVE, local references from Australia, Aotearoa-New Zealand, Somalia, and Canada, Black Velvet paintings, and water drumming samples. Stereotypes drawn on, and somewhat amended, included the larrikin, the lady, and the troubadour.

While the remixing of these elements is interesting and provocative, the reflexivity that accompanies them reinforces the fact that personal brands are not the same as individual people. This branded-self travels independently of people and their political statements. MCs may perform the conscious genre requirement of speaking out politically

on behalf of others, but this is then, in Arruda's terms "exuded" through the deployment of a personal brand into the media system and daily life (Arruda). My conclusions about these MCs' strategic deployment of personal brands are of significance more broadly. They have implications for further work on other hip hop artists and to individuals outside hip hop who want to express political critique but who are also subject to the imperative to "self-fashion" (text2cloud). These implications are seen here in light of the four central themes that emerged from the case studies.

Violence

The artists studied here handle the first of these themes, violence, differently. Ladi6 participates in occasional rhetorical rap insults such as "I gonna jack knife you up"; however, her emphasis on "oneness" and invitation to "walk on up to the light" also suggests a rejection of the hip hop practice of boasting of physical violence (Ladi6 "Jack knife", "Walk Right Up"; Solaa "Oneness").

Urthboy's critique of state-sanctioned violence suggests an alternative to passively consuming news of distant war. He has avoided the standard hip hop practice of linking rhetorical violence with feminising his male competitors. Pairing his participation in the predominantly masculine battleground of hip hop with his critique of military violence works against gangsta rap's masculine stereotype, where authenticity is equated with the threat of violence (deGenova 106).

Neither Ladi6 nor Urthboy, then, adopt the tactic of claiming authenticity in hip hop on the basis of familiarity with or of threatening physical violence. This is broadly congruent with the dictates of the conscious genre. The use of the stylistic resources of conscious hip hop's own requirement to be critical in order to be saleable in fact reflects

back on the proliferation of personal MC brands. Urthboy's unsettling message about the effects of consuming news of distant violence, or Ladi6's embodiment of peaceful alternatives to it are both interrupted by passing through the filter of self-branding.

The case study on K'naan analysed references to violence in his personal brand, which were found to be contradictory. K'naan has stated on the one hand that he aims to "show the hatred and aggression, [in Somali culture] 'cos that's the reality, but also to show the beauty and love" (IMCulture). That is, in his early tracks K'naan straddles the requirements of gangsta rap and conscious hip hop, and moves between these opposite ends of the genre spectrum. This is a complex position which leverages the identity credentials linked to hip hop authenticity (being Black and male, being outspoken about tough social conditions), and combines these with others that could win the rhetorical rap battle of having known hardship and violence (being Somali and from the 'cradle of civilisation', yet also from a politically unstable, war-torn area).

The fact that K'naan has personally known violence can seem to contradict the bland, saccharine universalism—due to the childish melody, removal of references to trauma and abstracted nationalism—performed in the later multitude of versions of "Wavin' Flag". In this way the centrality of experiences of violence to K'naan's personal narrative highlights that branding is a fraught process, because it demands consistency.

Yet, within a neoliberal "brand culture", there is also an imperative for a personal brand to be consistent (Schroeder 123). That is, viewing the lack of references to violence in "Wavin' Flag" is not just a case of K'naan lacking his early stylistic and lyrical 'hardness' as an individual rapper, and therefore being inconsistent and inauthentic. His personal brand itself is diluted, broken; he has confused his consumer. In the terms that have been applied to job-seekers, he has not presented a "recognizable, consistent, and employable [or listen-able] self" (Gershon 282).

This limiting aspect of self-branding can be extrapolated more broadly. For example, South Sudanese-Canadian MC, Emmanuel Jal's personal brand of being a 'Warchild'—also branded as a product of violence— has been distributed across multiple media, such as on the cover of his memoir (Jal and Davies) (Figure 40).

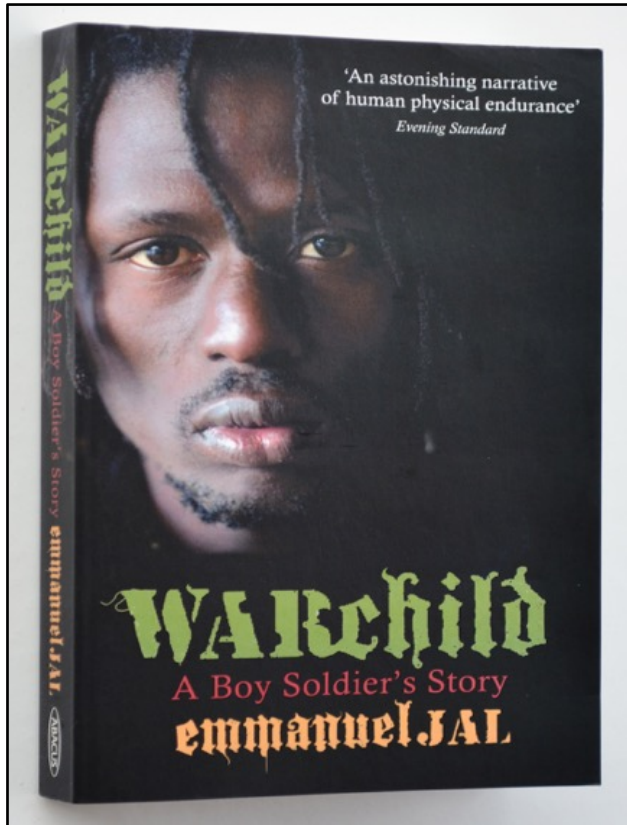


FIGURE 40. COVER OF WARCHILD: A BOY SOLDIER'S STORY.

Jal has recounted that he “was at The Hague ... and I heard two women say, ‘that’s that war child’, and I thought I am not a child anymore, I am a man, that is not me” (Sydney Opera House and St James Ethics Centre). Therefore, on the one hand, artists such as Jal, Ladi6, Urthboy and K’naan do present political critique and bring visibility to groups of people and their experiences of violence, such as child soldiers, news media consumers, and refugees. At the same time, however, their personal brands (such as warchild) can interrupt interaction with the artists as individuals, and any political critique that they may be expressing, such as on the topic of violence. This also suggests that the

message they perform on behalf of others is somewhat muffled as it is tied to a personal brand which competes for attention with their political messages.

Awake and Aware

The second nexus of contending forces is the idea of being 'conscious' itself: that is, leveraging a branded self that is ostensibly endowed with articulate awareness of social issues.

Of the three artists studied, Urthboy is more hesitant in his invocation of the hopeful ideas that underlie a conscious MC brand. His reflection on his position as an MC, or the imperative to be politically 'awake', is heard in his tracks, such as "Modern Day Folk", as well as in comments onstage and in interviews.

However, Urthboy must negotiate the limits to his political critique that are found in the conscious performer-brand. On the one hand, his actions are political statements. His work as a mentor and label manager to female and non-White artists shows him taking action on the political issue of unequal representation in Australian hip hop. At the same time, his personal brand is already endowed with the value of being politically outspoken and speaking 'for' Australian hip hop. It is easier to be celebrated for your political consciousness if you are already a visible spokesperson who is asked for your opinion. Urthboy's political critique sustains valid criticism in the sense that he usurps the voices of those more marginalised.

In contrast to Urthboy, Ladi6 does not make overt lyrical statements of political critique. Instead, her use of the conscious hip hop resources sees her bear messages of encouragement and use the role of a visionary to help listeners experience "uplift" as they "walk on up to the light" (Peoples 28; Ladi6 "Walk Right Up"). A female artist who claims

performance space, or 'ladyspace', within a conscious lineage, Ladi6 presents a political statement through her embodied performance. Her branding as an uplifting lady is "resistant to the market demands for sexualized representations that reinforce gendered and racialized stereotypes", as she is an "individual artist [who] negotiate[s] and complicate[s] nuanced performances in response" to those market demands (Hobson and Bartlow 3).

A problem with celebrating performers as 'uplifting', however, is that it reinforces that people suffering the effects of inequality, poverty, and discrimination only need to look to hopeful role models and emulate their individualist respectability in order to be hauled out of their predicament. It reinforces that "life politics", and focusing on self-development is a more comfortable prospect than focusing on structural inequality. This can imply that people's unfortunate situations are self-inflicted in the first place. The current social context which "reifies entrepreneurialism" is one in which a 'personal branding guru' can proclaim, "[w]hat makes you unique, makes you successful!" (Gandini 124; Arruda). The belief that everyone can achieve 'success' by celebrating their individual uniqueness and deploying this through a branding strategy denies the reality of systemic inequality. A problem with focusing on 'walking up to the light' is that it moves attention away from the possibility of looking squarely at the 'darkness', seeing others also struggling there, and acting to take power from those responsible for the predicament.

K'naan's personal brand clearly uses the role of being a conscious MC bringing the news of his own 'struggle', and of fellow Somalis', fellow refugees', those in "the horn" of Africa and more broadly the victims of "so many wars" (K'naan "Until the Lion", "Blues for the Horn"). In "Wavin' Flag", 'the message' or 'the news' of the daily reality of living with war and poverty is weakened, as the same track is malleable enough to also convey a global celebration through the apparently unifying forces of football and Coca-Cola.

The case studies on Ladi6, Urthboy, and K'naan highlighted that the genre of conscious hip hop contains contradictions in relation to the requirement for MCs to be 'political'. Being 'awake to and aware of' injustice and inequality is possible. However, conveying this through the personal MC brand when there is a ready expectation for it means that the impact of the political message is lessened. The 'conscious' personal brand establishes the audience's expectations that they will receive a political message, and once received it can seem that the process of consuming the brand is done, without taking further political action. Further, collective political action is implicitly discouraged when a 'political' artist themselves complies with the imperative to self-brand and be occupied by individual concerns.

The reflexivity produced by pushing a personal brand ahead of the individual in mediated, interactive contexts is another factor that detracts from conscious MCs' political critique. This is seen clearly in the examples of artists lending their brands to charitable efforts, such as Urthboy's branded 'U' painted on his hand being included in a campaign for a 'wall of hands', or Ladi6 being a featured artist for a post-earthquake concert. K'naan loaning "Wavin' Flag" to the Young Artists for Haiti is a more complex and more visible example of his brand benefiting from charity performance. The fact that he then reconfigured this song for a range of other uses shows that, even as he donated his song to the Haitian cause, the benefits of the charitable attention also flow to 'brand K'naan'. Further, the easy match between conscious MC brands and certain constrained ways of 'being political', such as charity singles, fundraisers and photographed visits to afflicted people, reinforces the problematic dominance of these patronising methods.

K'naan's example in particular points to the limits of self-branding itself. The requirements of branding are that consistency and flexibility are kept in balance. In this sense K'naan's branding as articulate and hardcore lost its consistency when he became

associated with an 'everyman' anthem to further the corporate interests of Coca-Cola and FIFA. His brand at this point had further 'reach' and displayed flexibility, but its consistency was lost.

2010's many instances of "Wavin' Flag" also highlight a further limit to political critique. In them, K'naan performs an anthem of celebration. Celebrating can be a momentary act in which suffering is forgotten, or the triumph of surviving hardship is honoured. However, those in the globe in a more fortunate position have less to lose by forgetting the world's problems: those suffering them are *themselves* forgotten. Forgetting suffering and celebrating through the confluence of music, soccer, soft drink and the mega-corporations that distribute them can have the negative consequence of rendering those suffering as less visible. In fact, the tokenistic appearance of Brown boys in the sun-drenched wonders of a music video/advertising anthem, or doing moves in the crowd at K'naan's concert in South Africa, are made to stand for the poor joining in, and endorsing, the party.

In this way, "Wavin' Flag" suggests an endpoint to the effectiveness of the conscious MC role of representing suffering people when it is intertwined with self-branding. After all, if strategic manipulation of the same lyrics and similar music and images can apparently benefit Haiti earthquake survivors, a range of Canada's 'Young Artists', Coca-Cola, and FIFA, then the political representation in this track is so broad as to lose all specificity. Ostensibly benefiting the range of interests from a mega-corporation to some of the world's poorest people who have also suffered natural disasters, famine, and civil war within the participatory glue of a musical track is an extreme example of the multiple uses of a personal brand.

Further fields of study suggested by this thesis are to hear directly from those who 'receive charity' about better alternatives to celebrity and hip hop humanitarianism,

together with sourcing empirical data about the concrete effectiveness of this form of political/marketing work. Examples for such study include charities such as Emmanuel Jal's Gaa Africa education program for former child soldiers, the I Am a Star for Somalia project associated with K'naan, or The Asylum Seeker Resource Centre associated with Urthboy.

It is true, as outlined in the literature review, that the conscious MC role was always political, strategic and entrepreneurial. As outlined there, hip hop MCs were early exemplars of these intertwined aspects of a career. In the words of American comedian Maria Bamford, "like most Americans, I would like to help others ... while being televised" (MaxRenn1984). Therefore, the implications of Ladi6, Urthboy and K'naan's conscious messages, such as 'Australia needs a more compassionate refugee policy', 'be positive and liberate yourself, or 'wherever you are from in the world, be proud of your origins and celebrate', are also subject to the criticism often levelled at artists whose work contains political or social comment.

As outlined earlier, there is not an absolute division between political critique and entertainment in hip hop, that umbrella term for a creation narrative, a business, a game, a hobby, and a "text of being" (Gates Jr. xii). However, a problem with emphasising the genre marker of 'conscious' in the personal brands of Ladi6, Urthboy and K'naan's is that the genre itself has co-opted the rebel voice as a required performance, making any political critique expressed by MCs easy to applaud without necessarily thinking about the message. In addition, in a neoliberal era, messages of political critique can be interrupted and lost in the sea of other brands (personal and corporate) that seem to be taking a political stance in the "brandscape", yet which ultimately reinforce the seeming necessity of capitalism's "monolithic control" (Carah 70-1).

Ladyspace and Brotown

The three case studies reveal the centrality of gender as a site of discursive struggle. The conscious artists studied all amend gender stereotypes—within a limited heteronormative range.

Ladi6 plays with the role of a lady by combining it with the confident force of an MC's verbal onslaught. An artist such as Ladi6, then, is not, like other women studied, "resid[ing] at the margins of the music industry and ... peripheral to the dominant discourses surrounding hip hop music" (LaBennett 109). The implication of 'rising above' hardship or the automatic 'hypersexualisation' of women in hip hop can be read as an alternative approach to creating a female hip hop brand with longevity, and so avoiding Lieb's lifecycle model for female pop stars. Ladi6 does create her own embodied 'ladyspace', and thus political critique, within a genre where normalisation of male MCs' dominance remains.

Urthboy is a heterosexual male: or one of those who dominate hip hop performance internationally. As a White man, he also fits the stereotype of who 'is' Australian hip hop. In this context, his collaboration with, record label signing of, and social support for female artists, Indigenous artists and those with non-Anglo ethnicity is noticeable. Urthboy's collaboration with these artists does not revolve around stereotypical presentations of gender, which has been attributed to hip hop performances as a hypermasculine hardness contrasted with a hypersexualised femininity (particularly associated with gangsta rap and commercial hip hop).

Nevertheless, there *are* moments of congruence between Urthboy's personal brand and the normalisation of dominant White male participation in Australian hip hop. This is reflected in references to sport, which is a source of passion for the stereotypical White

Australian male. It is also seen in his play with a self-deprecating larrikin character that is a stereotypical version of White Australian masculinity. This has been discerned in the *Spitshine* cover art, “No Rider” lyrics, and self-reflexive banter and costume play with ‘being a rapper’.

Urthboy’s efforts to include others in a ‘circle’ of Australian hip hop are countered by his male self-branding. Even as he raps about his daughter, wife, and other women in his family, shouts out to women’s sports teams such as the Matildas, and said onstage that female artist, Sampa the Great, is the “best MC in Australia right now”, his ‘boyish’ image still sets up a ‘natural’ way to be in Australian hip hop (Urthboy, Okenyo, L-FRESH The Lion).

K’naan’s interaction with hip hop’s gender stereotypes is one that claims a position of being the ultimate ‘hardcore’ masculine identity of having known terrible violence and suffering. He amends the stereotype of a brutish Black man in hip hop by emphasising his critique of cycles of violence and by claiming a role as a pacifist poet-philosopher. His emphasis on Somalia’s poetic heritage and his place as a contemporary incarnation of this privileges a masculinity that is articulate and thoughtful, flying against the stereotype of Black men in hip hop as thugs. However, the universality depicted in “Wavin’ Flag” is one that privileges young men and the heroic roles of male sports star or MC. This suggests that if anyone will be lifted out of poverty by waving their flag like their heroes, it will be boys.

His move into more commercially palatable hip hop/pop saw him repeat exhausted clichés of masculinity. From a critical gangsta, to the emblematic ‘brown boy made good’, to yet another ‘star’ made for a club’s “Bang Bang-ing” soundtrack, K’naan’s iterations of masculinity vary, but they are within a conventional range. He does not support female artists in the manner of Urthboy, and does not exhibit awareness and respect for a

'ladyspace' created by artists such as Ladi6. He riffs on themes associated with masculinity such as violence and partly critiques them, but he is not presenting themes that disrupt the centrality of men in hip hop.

Further study might concentrate on conscious women artists from a range of locations in order to assess uses of 'uplift' and 'respectability' versus more overtly sexual styles and themes in self-branding. In addition, the practical means to redress the imbalance of participation by gender can be studied. The effectiveness of girls' hip hop workshops in increasing their participation in the genre as working artists can be analysed, to answer the call of an audience member at a Ladi6 performance, so keen to hear from the performer that she kept insisting, "Come on Lady!" (Ladi6 and Electric Wire Hustle).

Branding the Globe

The rhetoric of a global human 'oneness', on face value, is used by artists such as those studied here to inspire social justice awareness and hope in their listeners. However, the openness of the universality implied is dangerously vague. It can, in fact, be capitalised upon to promote corporations and images that benefit an exclusive few.

Urthboy does not invoke belief in religion in advocating human oneness. Instead, he puts any glimmer of faith for social change in political critique, while retaining a realistic tone about its use. He has continued to collaborate with like-minded artists as a praxis of vocal protest. This suggests a belief in vocal protest and creative, entrepreneurial action, rather than a spiritual project.

In fact, one of the lines most associated with Urthboy, his claim that he is "done keepin' it real, I keep it relevant", brands him as a down-to-earth political mouthpiece, thereby supplanting divinity with political commitment as his claim to conscious authenticity

(Urthboy “Keep It Relevant”). This endows Urthboy’s perspective with humility, rather than the righteousness of being a preacher. This is evident as he presents ethical dilemmas of living in an era of man-made climate change, dramatic financial change, and increased awareness of conflicts, uprisings, refugee populations and growing inequality.

In this sense, although Elefant Traks and The Herd have their own brands, they are intertwined with Urthboy’s, and form a part of my reading of his political critique. The combination of his roles as label manager, soloist, band member and visible figure in Australian hip hop suggests a greater political project of developing Australian hip hop and music and aiming to achieve greater diversity of its artists.

Ladi6, on the other hand, is an example of an MC who does draw on notions of divinity that can be related to by a broad range of believers or non-believers. She uses tropes that are themselves part of a market niche. For Ladi6 the suggestion that a creator is feminine is a departure from the influence of Christianity on many Pacific Islanders, suggesting a syncretic performance of spirituality that is broadly inclusive, yet an individualised presentation.

Oneness, however, is also an idea referred to in conversation as a greeting, a farewell, and a space-filler. For example, ‘one love’ appears in online chat, and in the plethora of apps such as ‘Oneness’ that are used to send miniature virtual blessings (or annoyances) between social networking users (Figure 42). Oneness can be so nebulous and syrupy as to appear politically void.



FIGURE 41. ONE LOVE APP (ONE LOVE).

Ladi6's use of this trope is, like her very participation in hip hop, politically performative, due to her gender and ethnicity. Her strategy of harnessing the associations with the lineage of African-American and hip hop ladies also suggests a female-centred version of the rhetoric of oneness found in these genres. In this sense she is an example of an artist strategically using a notion of the universal that has some particularity.

Yet the promotional benefit to Ladi6 by preaching to the converted, that is, calling for 'one love' to an audience expecting the refrain, is open to the accusation of capitalisation of apparently pure motivations that is levelled at various New Age practices and self-help industries. Capitalising on a hopeful moment of audience oneness while emphasising individualised branding suggests that experiences of collectivity are currently largely relegated to contained spaces, such as consuming music (whether live or recorded). In fact, keeping the imaginary of oneness to specific spaces suggests that participating in music is political action enough, while the real divisions that oneness is meant to counter, such as sharply rising inequality, continue.

Like Ladi6, K'naan links his branding to spiritual symbols (his use of Islamic calligraphy, geometry, and prayer positions, and her lyrics and gold cowl). On the one hand the inclusion of some Islamic elements in his images and costume suggest a quiet pride in his religious heritage that is peaceful in intent. His use of these symbols also works to stake a place as a novel MC: a strategic take on the conscious role of preacher; and yet another in the catalogue of identity/style positions. The commodification of a self is seen in the way that these elements become part of K'naan's personal brand, found on t-shirts, posters, and websites.

Comparatively, then, for Ladi6 and K'naan an invocation of oneness through either a feminine divinity or Allah suggests faith, or at least hope, behind their 'conscious

messages', whereas Urthboy's critical position does not suggest a spiritual motivation. Focusing on a hopeful message, as Ladi6 raps, "I gotta breathe affirmative" (Solaa), or as Bronx MC *La Bruja* said, "[i]f I focus on the negatives there's no way I'll be able to move", is one strategy of "consciousness-raising, of bringing awareness to issues through the presentation of an alternative style" (LaBennett 121). Placing this within the global hip hop nation, or "global cipa", can make it seem that there is a mass of people working for, and listening for, political change (Spady, Alim and Meghelli). However, linking this community of peers to (quasi)religiosity or spirituality within a personal MC brand does not change the fact that the politically critical potential of oneness is limited.

In particular, the vagueness of oneness makes it ripe for co-option by mega corporations such as Coca-Cola and FIFA, who made use of it in their collaboration with K'naan. The hope that we can all connect peacefully is, after all, immanently saleable. The message of oneness performed by MCs can be remixed by powerful interests to retain the status quo, by funnelling hope and desire for political change into the consumption of, for example, soft drink, soccer broadcasting, and music.

In fact, it is sometimes suggested that hip hop itself is the proper repository for hope and desire for political change. In her track "The Healer", Erykah Badu sings:

Hip Hop is bigger than religion
 Hip hop is bigger than my nigger
 Hip hop is bigger than the government (Erykah Badu "The Healer")

How big hip hop is —and what might politically be done with it —can never be proven, fixed, or agreed upon as to its membership. The imaginary of a global hip hop nation, emblematic of the broadest human community connected 'as one', preaches inclusion yet nevertheless repeatedly draws on a limited range of problematic tropes, such as hope and self-belief being the antidote to inequality. Here the function of an "imagined community" is placed beyond religion or the government, yet it is not clear what this

means for the institutions of religion or governments once the punters leave the venue (Anderson).

For conscious artists, therefore, the core of performing oneness is self-reflexive, seen in a performance by Erykah Badu of “The Healer” in Sydney in 2011 (Good Vibrations Festival). Like healing, entering into the moment of Badu’s performance as divine conduit invites belief in the prophetess figure (or at least a suspension of disbelief). The experience of being an audience member includes appreciating and moving to an extended introduction which ritualistically opens the show, and is full of stage business tricks. Erykah has her head bowed and covered with a hat, a costume item which is part of her brand. She strikes a tuning fork, which is a part of her cover art and song lyrics, and speaks to ideas of sound as healing and a cross-cultural, realms-crossing resonance, and the idea of the internet and older, analog carriers of frequency such as a tuning fork as mediums of spiritual attunement.

Electric, electronic and somatic ‘technologies’ mediate the shared sound and spectacle of this performance. Young Australian men recite Erykah Badu’s lyrics. They hold aloft smartphones produced by other young people who physically built “the hardware in sweatshops” (Andrejevic 15, Carah 165-6). This mediates their experience of the performance and draws attention to the fact that they are capturing something of brand Erykah Badu via their devices (Carah 43-62). These technologies are produced and distributed through capitalist channels, that is, they are “tethered to broader social and political structures” (Carah 165-6). This highlights that it is impossible (short of a radical ‘off the grid’ life) to escape moral implication in an economic system that relies on inequality (Carah 165-6). Audience members post commentary, images and video online, while they also enjoy being in the same humid tent as the *actual Erykah* and her actual

voice and body, and may imagine themselves as part of the global hip hop community beyond “the government”.

Erykah Badu’s invocation of all that hip hop is or could be demonstrates that oneness is at once imaginative, hopeful, strategic and entertaining. Moments of (imagined) unity may be experienced (because, or perhaps in spite of, being jostled against the press of many sweaty bodies). Yet the workings of brand Erykah (which builds on brand ‘lady’, brand prophet, brand hip hop) are never far away.

Conscious hip hop’s confluence of competitive self-branding, the rhetoric of oneness, capitalist, quasi-religious and entertainment motivations is symptomatic of other popular uses of the notion of a global community, such as in mega-sporting events. In both, a sleight of hand exists in presenting oneness, which glosses over political problems and inequality. This has been seen in the case studies in this thesis as working to normalise the atomisation of self-branding, which works against collectivity; as individuals who capitalise on the resources of the self ostensibly achieve dominance over others.

The globe or ‘humanity all as one’ is not, in reality, a productive site for liberatory hope at all. The phenomenon of human created climate change, the interdependent mechanisms of global capital made obvious through the ‘global financial crisis’ since 2008, extreme weather events, nuclear accidents, mass movements of refugees, ongoing wars, and political turbulence all are unlikely to be overcome by imagining oneness.

On a smaller scale, a further problem of circulating a personal brand is that an artist’s performance of human oneness can be manipulated in ways which they did not intend. A striking example of this is seen in a final use of “Wavin’ Flag”. As reported by media outlets, entertainment and hip hop observers alike, during Mitt Romney’s 2012 campaign for the Republican candidature, K’naan’s “Wavin’ Flag” was played at a public rally to celebrate Romney’s pre-selection win over Newt Gingrich in Florida (Greenwald;

Huffington Post; Verma). K'naan swiftly tweeted Romney, saying that he didn't "endorse this message" (Huffington Post).

This strategic manipulation of a message of universality can be made highly partisan. Romney's "message", for example, is hardly one that could pretend to lift the children of the world out of poverty. This example highlights that the audience's experience of 'waving a flag' that is, of identifying through the representative vehicle of a hip hop artist and empathising with others is co-opted, brandalised, and re-directed towards a celebration of divisive 'conservative' values. In this sense uplift used by conscious hip hop artists can be seen as performative moments of letting off steam that nevertheless allow harmful policies to continue.

The Limits

The answer, then, to the primary research question is that self-branding by conscious MCs does limit political critique. Making use of the common hip hop theme of violence can generate critical comments about war, yet the MC brand is still linked to being a dominant individual, a genre resource linked to violence. The artists studied here amend gender stereotypes within a limited range, yet the congruence of Urthboy and K'naan's brands with ideas that reinforce male domination is problematic. MCs' branding is always entwined with the *fait accompli* of using resources from the conscious genre. In addition, any politically critical message that they bear (as "exuded" through the tea towel, the stubbie holder, the email newsletter, the cover art) nevertheless directs consumers' attention back to the personal brand itself. Even when MCs gesture away from the self towards the universal, or human oneness, this is a kind of publicly enacted 'spirituality-lite', a sop that can be used to distract audiences from the difficulty of political problems.

Oneness is also a marketable message that benefits the process of artists' brands being accepted as sufficiently wise, conscious, or respectable; and can also be manipulated to profit elites.

The hip hop creation narrative, (which itself has been highly commodified, as seen in the careers of DJ Kool Herc and Grandmaster Flash) is centred on a creative protest against discriminatory socioeconomic conditions. Scholarship on hip hop has explored the cultural form's relationship to those of the African diaspora, the implications for individual 'authenticity' in its emphasis on sampling and signification, the causes and impacts of its gender roles, its social formations and the emphasis on style of its performers. In addition to these established themes I have emphasised the importance of the conscious-gangsta spectrum of genre, and the values invoked as performers move along this. I have also emphasised that self-branding, or a manipulation of the resources of the self, is not, in fact, an act carried out only by artists that may be seen to be inheritors of the gangsta genre; that conscious artists also make highly strategic use of these resources. Therefore, the tensions between self-promotion and community representation bear keenly on those MCs that use the conscious role.

While I have achieved my aim of moderating the celebration of hip hop artists 'representing' their 'people' in a cacophony of global noise, this is not to say that my position is one of condemning their entrepreneurial initiative or, indeed, of proclaiming that they are inauthentic as MCs. Instead, this study has turned from a scholarly preoccupation with authenticity by emphasising the workings of a personal brand: which is always-already at a remove from an authentic 'self'. This analysis of three MCs' brands has, in turn, drawn attention to the capitalist mode that many individuals, and not only MCs, move within. Job-seekers are encouraged to self-brand and have a personal portfolio online (while bearing in mind their 'digital tattoo') (Gershon). Facebook profiles

encourage continual self-curation. The imperative to present a branded self (or, indeed, several at once) that reconfigures a life narrative as a marketable resource is evident far beyond the sphere of hip hop.

Hip hop may therefore be seen as being a highly visible cultural and performance form at the vanguard of this globalised socio-economic development. Hip hop historians placed the hip hop genesis in the context of the decline of manufacturing jobs in inner-city African American neighbourhoods and the impact of government policies which withdrew social support from these areas (Chang; Rose *Black Noise*). The emphasis on entrepreneurialisation (whether by being a 'gangster', drug-dealer or something more 'respectable') as a path to escaping these conditions is a burden that is now placed on individuals on an international scale.

I do not suggest that the hardship and challenges experienced by those in the ghettos that were home to hip hop's development are experienced equally by everyone with a Facebook profile. Instead, this thesis has pinpointed that the political critique of conscious MCs is bound by the act of self-branding, which is touted as necessary for individuals in their leisure time, at work, and as performers. This is symptomatic of broader socioeconomic changes, and in the current era these are very broad indeed. In this sense conscious MCs are emblematic of the strategic uses, and limits of, a personal brand for conveying political critique.

Challenges for the Hip Hop Theorist

During the time of this study (2008 to 2016) there were developments within both hip hop and information and communications technology that influenced the methodology of this thesis. The most dramatic development was the rise in the use of Web 2.0, or

increasingly interactive online technologies, and their adoption by hip hop participants, cultural commentators and scholars—at least for those with access to these resources. Hip hop's networking and spread has been previously affected by the use of technology such as power poles, turntables, dub plates and sound systems (Rose *Black Noise* 96) and mixtapes (Maher). However, the pace and proliferating volume of content that may now be uploaded and shared, of performances, interviews, workshops, freestyles, recordings, videos, photographs, behind-the-scenes footage, comments, and rehearsals, means that the gesturing to the virtual and the global is a much more integrated, and possibly overwhelming, part of many hip hop participants' 'local' experience.

Now, even in a local performance venue showcasing 'Aussie hip hop', in both the accompanying street press interview and the images on t-shirts and hoodies worn on the night, the awareness of the many portal moments of transcultural connectivity is clear. The past pronouncements of scholars studying hip hop's performative invocation of place and far-flung allegiances is now seen in a myriad of continually refreshed examples, both on- and off- line. Indeed, during the writing of this thesis, 'online' has now come to include smart phones in the pockets of the performers, the promoter, and the audience, as they simultaneously interact with the amplified voices, electronic beats and moving bodies of hip hop performance (for analysis of such mediation, see Carah 43-62). The performers themselves tweet their thoughts backstage and post to Instagram their photos and videos of the crowd. Some, such as former freestyle-champion MC, Supernatural, encourage the audience to post, tweet, and share their responses to the performance in order to increase their exposure as a part of the performance, and then address a freestyle into the lens of an audience smartphone (Figure 42) (Narcicyst et al).



FIGURE 42. SUPERNATURAL (NARCICYST ET AL). IPHONE PHOTOGRAPH BY AUTHOR.

Other performers introduce a freshly written song live by asking that, just like “being intimate ...we ask you not to record this and post it on the internet”, which would lessen the impact of the song’s future release (Flight of the Conchords). The speed of technological change during the writing of this thesis made my early observations, such as artists’ concentration on MySpace, out of date. The change in rapping styles and the rise and fall of hyped musical figures does not, of course, remain fixed, unlike the objective of writing a doctoral thesis. Indeed, the pace of change now is as instant as a mouse click or, perhaps more likely, a finger tap or swipe to scroll through a Facebook or Twitter news feed.

Within such a continually changing context, where such “informationalism” can overwhelm a hip hop theorist, the rubric of reading MC’s brands as an abstraction away from an authentic self thankfully proved to be flexible and robust enough to accommodate such rapid change (Castells 13). In fact, the explosive nature of interactivity with cultural

forms such as hip hop (on the platforms of blogs, Twitter, Facebook, forums) means more people are broadcasting their own readings of MCs' brands than ever before. Audience interaction with the performer's brands (and any corporate brands involved) means that they perform free immaterial labour on behalf of the brand/s as they produce their own texts (Carah 155). This proliferation of texts can produce an ambient awareness of a performer's brand, so that a person who is not themselves a hip hop fan is exposed to 'mentions' of an MC on social media. In such a dynamic information environment, the illusion that a cultural scholar could be 'objective' about these proliferating mentions is highlighted. Instead, the very act of scholarship means that I am also embedded in the realm of commentary and opinion that is a part of a broader "brand culture" as academic texts on hip hop are given keywords that interact with those of the artists, fans, and critics (Schroeder 123). This realm of commentary and opinion is like 'cloud' computing that Carah writes of, where both are in fact "connected to the material accumulation of information and capital and ... communication in these spaces is always-already commodified" (166).

The Voice in the Centre

Within this context of information flows, perhaps MCs' continued use of the voice and the body suggests individual agency. This is part of why MCing is marketed as an appropriate expressive vehicle for youth who lack access to information and communication technologies (Morganics; SistaNative; The Last Kinection).

MCs make a sequence of videos that include a short rap and 'tag' the next rapper to make the next one (3ree6ixty). Even in this mediated form their flow, confidence, and rhymes are judged; unlike other branded selves such as those presented by some reality

television show contestants, “specific skills” are, in fact, required (3ree6ixty; Hearn “Reality Television” 205). In this way MCs’ voices persist at the centre of technological mediation and self-branding. While the voice and the body are connected to the commodified personal brand, something nevertheless escapes this promotionalist function.

This was memorably outlined using Bruce Springsteen as an example,

Within the myth of Bruce Springsteen is a human being called Bruce Springsteen. Inside the electronically mediated voice in the stadium and on the recording, is another voice. Regardless of whether Springsteen ... really lives the stories he narrates, it is the human being Bruce Springsteen who sings and speaks of these experiences that the audience are responding to (Negus *Producing Pop* 74).

Springsteen is a particularly mythologised example, and it is worth acknowledging that this statement from 1992 invites the prospect of audience research, so that audiences actually get to say what they are “responding to”. However, it does mirror the fact that even in the current context of ubiquitous self-branding, a context that conscious MCs operate in, there is a “human being” and a “voice” of an MC that continues to exist.

In the case of MCs, the very role of MC is a vehicle for an individual voice to be heard as it threatens, jokes, preaches, hypes, or reflects. This voice is co-opted into systems of transaction and exchange; it is filtered through the forms of self-branding. However, it is still a source of critique that can present a message to be heard *through* the prism of branding. The rapping body can be a part of a performance of reflexivity about individuals’ place in social systems, such as when K’naan shakes his head and reflects that he had to “grind, sell drugs”. Some potential for political critique remains due to the immediacy of the MCing voice, expressed through a moving body that is not the same as an individual brand. Bodies and voices point to and feed personal brands, but they are not the brand. The critical potential of the voice is that it can *co-opt back*, and this occurs not only in branded, abstracted forms, but in immediate and powerful interpersonal contexts, such as live performance. This is where I would revisit the concept of ‘love’.

Branded Love

While attending such performances during my research, I would experience an internal struggle. I would simply want to enjoy the performance, the music, and the moment, using the activity of moving in a crowd as a therapeutic stress release or a moment of physical expression. Then I would think that the moment was beyond branding; it is about sense-making for all of the individuals present; *they* create their own meaning about what is happening (or maybe they don't think at all). Perhaps there is a place for love of the music after all, and that needs to be included when considering self-branding.

Then I would see audience members take photos of the performer, and see the merchandise table at the back of the room or the foyer, where, for example, Urthboy's new logo and cover art was printed on t-shirts, hoodies, CDs and records, and where a constant stream of buyers were obtaining this brand to wear themselves. (CDs were less popular, unless purchased in 'collectors' box sets or by a financially strapped doctoral candidate studying the artist). 'Vinyl heads' carried their large objects out of the venue. Then it became clear that the personal MC brand spreads from the venue and becomes a part of audience members' lives. They play the music, like and share it on Spotify, Apple Music, MixCloud, SoundCloud, Pandora and Tidal. They think, 'I will start following Urthboy on Facebook', or Twitter, or Instagram. They may sign up for the Elephant Traks email list. Each of these actions is another interaction with the personal brand.

The moment of celebration during Urthboy's show, the enjoyment of a favourite track to jump around to, or the moment of appreciating the fact that Urthboy is still performing or that he supports an impressive line-up of female performers is still tethered back to his personal brand. The experience of co-presence, hearing a voice and moving

your body to music are not the same as the personal brand; yet the brand is present in this space. The socially provocative moment of witnessing female performers claim a spot-lit space in a male-dominated arena does somewhat escape the bounds of branding. At the moment, however, they are connected, and branding complicates, and therefore limits, this political critique. As Carah concludes, “[c]ulture is becoming more of a valuable resource of the accumulation of capital. Culture conforms more and more to the logic of branding and marketing” (175).

Writing about his third album, K’naan regrets choosing to be marketed for the sake of his typical fan, which became, apparently, a fifteen-year-old American girl. This reflects the “permanent contradiction between being an “artist”—responsible only to one’s own creative impulses—and being a star—responsible to one’s market” previously identified with rock musicians (Frith 54). His struggle with expressing his life narrative through the means of branding is shown (along with an insulting presumption about teenage girls):

I now suspect that packaging me as an idolized star to the pop market in America cannot work; while one can dumb down his lyrics, what one cannot do without being found out is hide his historical baggage. His sense of self. His walk. I imagine the 15-year-old girls can understand that. If not intellectually, perhaps spiritually (K’naan “On Censoring”).

This piece of K’naan’s suggests some critique of the industry he has been embedded in, or at least his own choices within it. Here he points to the limits of branding the conscious MC and their political critique. Being marketed as an “idolized star to the pop market” is suggested to be what took, or tried to conceal, his “walk”. K’naan adds that he “may never find my old walk again, but I hope someday to see beauty in the graceless limp back toward it” (“On Censoring”). While he limps back, the challenge of how to counter the politically limiting nature of self-branding remains.

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